

THE VIRGINIA-NORTH CAROLINA FRONTIER IN 1776

William Preston, William Christian  
and  
The Military Expedition Against the Overhill Cherokee Towns

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## Preface

The initial goals of this essay were limited in scope and somewhat narrowly defined. Scant attention has been focused on the problems of frontier defense during the American Revolution, and this was most particularly the case with the Southern frontier. While several expeditions were mounted by the Revolutionary governments against both their British and Indian adversaries during the course of the war, seemingly the only one spectacular enough to capture the imagination of and provide serious inquiry by historians was George Rogers Clark's expedition-raid into the old Northwest in 1778. The combined North Carolina-Virginia expedition against the Overhill Cherokee tribes in what is presently northeastern Tennessee, led by the Virginian Colonel William Christian in the autumn of 1776, had sunk into a state of historical limbo, earning but a footnote or at most a sentence or two in most histories of the period. This seems to have occurred because although the expedition was quite successful, it was also singularly unspectacular. Desiring to fill this void in historical studies, I undertook the recreation and analysis of the events of the expedition itself and the situation on the frontier in late 1775 and in 1776 which led to it.

It was in the attempt to comprehend and assess the situation on the North Carolina-Virginia frontier during this period that the essay inexorably expanded far beyond my initial limited goals.

I found myself immersed in the chaotic, labyrinthine morass of British-Indian and patriot-Indian relations and diplomacy. The picture was and is obscured by a welter of claims and counter-claims, charges and countercharges, semi-articulated and formulated strategic and tactical plans, incomplete and misleading communications, rumors, and the real and alleged machinations of land speculators and British and colonial agents and traders.

Certain questions, previously only dimly perceived, took on new stature and increased relevance. What was the British strategy in relation to both the Indians and the frontier Loyalists during Sir Henry Clinton's abortive expedition to the Southern colonies in the winter and spring of 1775-1776? Were there any long-term British plans, explicit or implicit, for the use of a combined Indian-Loyalist military force on the Southern frontier? If so, how did Colonel Christian's expedition affect these plans, or perhaps more to the point, the situation as it existed? Was the situation essentially the same after his military operations as before, or had it changed significantly in favor of one or the other of the contending forces?

Certain other questions, apparent at the conception of the study, retained and even increased their relevance. What was the response of the Virginia patriot government to the volatile situation on the frontier? How readily, in what manner, and to what degree did it react when confronted by the danger? What part did the frontiersmen play in providing for their own defense and to what extent were they forced to rely upon their own resources? To what extent was the Virginia government able to exploit the success

of the expedition in relation to control of the Indians and Loyalists?

It is, I believe, in the answers to these questions that the true importance of Colonel Christian's expedition lies. This paper is the end result of my attempt to provide those answers.

Although it would be impossible adequately to thank or even to acknowledge all the people who have aided me in the undertaking, I would like to take this opportunity to mention a few who come most readily to mind. Dr. Richard M. Brown has been extremely helpful throughout the course of my research and writing, drawing upon his long experience with history and historical method to provide cogent suggestions and criticisms at every level of development. Perhaps as important, his patience in dealing with my problems was seemingly infinite and deserves special thanks.

I would like to thank Dr. Edward M. Riley for the help he gave during the period of research and for reading and criticizing the final product of that research. Dr. Philip J. Funigello also aided me in a number of ways, including reading the final draft of this essay. I take full responsibility for any errors in either fact or judgment in the essay which have remained in spite of the help of these men.

Finally, I would like to thank especially Arthur M. and Anna M. Barnes, my parents, who have been a constant source of inspiration and without whose continued support, both moral and financial, this project never could have been completed.

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## ABSTRACT

In 1776, the situation on the Virginia-North Carolina frontier was highly unstable and in constant turmoil as American patriots and their British adversaries contested for the allegiance of powerful Cherokee tribes which were located there. The outcome of this contest was not predictable at the outset, as each side enjoyed certain advantages and each labored under certain disabilities. The British, though lacking in sufficient manpower to pose a military threat, had for a number of years worked to secure the friendship of the Indian tribes by supplying firearms, powder and shot, and other materials. They also, somewhat ineffectually, had attempted to prohibit settlers from encroaching on Cherokee lands. The patriot group, on the other hand, had a great deal of manpower which, if organized, could demonstrate militarily to the Cherokee the advantages of an alliance with the patriots.

This paper deals with British maneuvers on and intentions for the Virginia frontier in 1776 and in more depth with the reaction of Virginia patriots both on the frontier and in Williamsburg. One British goal, which seems implicit in their dealings in this area, appears to have been the creation of some type of rudimentary state, a refuge in which Loyalists and Indians could have been concentrated to ease problems of defense and supply. If such a plan had been successfully implemented, the Loyalists would have been free from coercion by the patriots and their allegiance conserved until they could have been used in conjunction with a British military expedition. To this end British agents entered the Cherokee towns to solidify support and prevent any indiscriminate attack on the frontier which would alienate Loyalists and cause them to support the patriot government. The British were unsuccessful in achieving the latter objective, and their failure called forth a response which removed the larger goal from the realm of possibility.

The Virginia patriot forces reacted to the threat in a series of swift, energetic responses. Those settlers who formed the leading edge of settlement resisted the Indians to the utmost of their limited resources, at the same time calling for assistance from Williamsburg. The communications link between the frontier and Williamsburg was Colonel William Preston. His energetic efforts to transmit information and to facilitate the purchase of supplies for the subsequent military expedition were in a sense the key to patriot success.

The government in Williamsburg showed foresight and energy in its reaction to the frontier situation. Aware that its claim of sovereignty over the frontier depended on its ability to deal with the Indians, the government launched a 2000 man force, commanded by Colonel William Christian, against the Cherokee. The success of his expedition left little doubt as to the locus of effective control of the Virginia frontier by the end of 1776.

THE VIRGINIA-NORTH CAROLINA FRONTIER IN 1776

## Chapter 1

### British Strategy for Sir Henry Clinton's 1776 Southern Campaign and Its Relation to the Cherokee Indians on the Virginia Frontier

The military situation in the rebellious North American colonies during the first year of the American Revolutionary War was, from the British standpoint, decidedly unfavorable for the prosecution of any major, sustained offensive operation. Those detachments of British regulars which had been stationed in the colonies at the outbreak of hostilities were often committed to static defensive positions in garrisons on the frontier. Nowhere was there a sufficiently large concentration of troops in a position where the conditions were suitable for carrying on an offensive unsupported by significant portions of the local populace.

Rather than accept a military stalemate, British strategic planners looked beyond the New England colonies, where the primary confrontation of hostile forces had occurred, to find a theatre of operations where conditions were more favorable. Based on evaluations of Loyalist sentiment and rebel strength offered by certain royal governors in the Southern colonies, it was deemed probable that a minimum demonstration of British military and naval might would result in the detachment of the "less hostile" South from the patriot cause. Josiah Martin, the royal governor of North Carolina, was particularly enthusiastic in his reports to the British ministry concerning the extent and pervasiveness of Loyalist

feeling in his colony.<sup>1</sup>

Although the situation in the Southern colonies altered at an accelerating pace during the fall and winter of 1775, the British ministry persisted in its plan to send a combined military-naval expedition to the South. While there were indications of rapidly growing patriot strength, fostered by extra-legal judicial and regulatory bodies, and a proportional disintegration of openly Loyalist sentiment, this does not seem to have been adequately recognized by the British ministry.

The plan, in its final form reported to General William Howe by Lord Dartmouth in October, 1775, called for the rendezvous off the North Carolina coast of a naval force under Sir Peter Parker sailing from Cork with a smaller expeditionary force from the northern colonies under the command of a general officer (later Sir Henry Clinton was so designated). Parker's fleet was to carry an extra 10,000 stand of arms and six light field pieces for the use of Loyalist contingents raised by Governor Martin.<sup>2</sup> Prolonged delays in the sailing of Parker's fleet from Cork, the discovery shortly after the fleet did sail that the largest capital ships had too deep a draft to permit passage of a bar at the mouth of Cape Fear River, and news from Governor Martin that the patriots had effective control of the colony for over one hundred miles inland eliminated all reasonable expectation of success of the expedition in terms of its original goals before it was under way.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Paul H. Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1964), 19.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 24.

At this point it would be well to attempt to discern British intentions concerning use of the Cherokee and other Indian tribes in conjunction with this expedition. Were the Cherokee attacks in the summer and fall of 1776 which led to William Christian's expedition a part of the British strategic plan? In a very early historical account of the expedition,<sup>4</sup> the British military officer C. Stedman explicitly stated that this was the British intention. He wrote of the British attempts to detach the Southern colonies from the more hostile North by fomenting some sort of civil war in the South. This was to be accomplished by the invasion of a combined Indian-Loyalist military force on the frontier of the Carolinas. In his account the naval force under Sir Peter Parker and Sir Henry Clinton was relegated to the status of a diversionary force, intended primarily to distract patriot attention and divide their forces.<sup>5</sup> He also spoke of a projected secondary expedition of British regulars which would enter the backcountry through East Florida and coordinate its attack with that of the Indian-Loyalist forces.<sup>6</sup>

The early historians of Tennessee, John Haywood<sup>7</sup> and J. G. M. Ramsey,<sup>8</sup> both accepted Stedman's contentions at face value.

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<sup>4</sup>C. Stedman, The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War (Dublin, 1794), I, 278ff.

<sup>5</sup>Stedman, Ibid., 279.

<sup>6</sup>Stedman, Ibid., 278.

<sup>7</sup>John Haywood, The Civil and Political History of the State of Tennessee from its Earliest Settlement to the Year 1796 (Knoxville, Tenn., 1823), 41ff.

<sup>8</sup>J. G. M. Ramsey, The Annals of Tennessee (Charleston, 1853), 142ff.

Certainly there are a number of indications of some consequence which tend to demonstrate his validity. Stedman had served in the colonies throughout the Revolutionary War under such notable military officers as Sir William Howe, Sir Henry Clinton, and the Marquis Cornwallis, as he proudly indicated on the title page. His mention of a British expeditionary force invading the colonies through East Florida corresponds with a letter allegedly written by Henry Stuart, British Indian agent, to the settlers of Watauga in the spring of 1776.<sup>9</sup> This apparently was sufficient evidence for both Haywood and Ramsey, and given their obvious predilection to place the "blame" for the attacks on the British, it suited their purposes nicely.

Further investigation into the situation seems to cast considerable doubt, however, on Stedman's usefulness in assessing the true goals and intentions of the British military officers and ministerial officials who did the bulk of planning for the Clinton expedition.

Regarding the proposed invasion through East Florida, it seems that this was proposed very early in the war by a South Carolina Loyalist, Thomas Brown, to relieve the frontier Loyalists in the Carolinas and to supply them with arms, ammunition, and various other necessities unobtainable on the frontier.<sup>10</sup> Whether

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<sup>9</sup>This letter is discussed, and its validity questioned in Philip M. Hamer, "The Wataugans and the Cherokee Indians in 1776," East Tennessee Historical Society Publications, 111 (Jan. 1931), 108-126.

<sup>10</sup>Jack M. Sosin, The Revolutionary Frontier 1763-1783 (New York, 1967), 89-90.

this plan was ever considered as a realistic alternative is questionable. Certainly it does not seem probable that the British planners would have committed more of their limited force of regulars, already stretched to the point of danger in the colonies, to such an expedition without fairly conclusive proof of success beforehand. The man in the best position to know the situation and evaluate it at this time was John Stuart, British superintendent of Indian affairs for the Southern department, who had been in St. Augustine since June 21, 1775.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in those portions of his correspondence which I have seen covering this period,<sup>12</sup> he never mentioned this expedition, nor do any of his correspondents question him concerning it.

The very logic of the entire campaign, which underwent frequent and often radical alterations in its strategic concept, would suggest that the Cherokee attacks, when they did come, were not in response to any systematic plan of operations. The Clinton campaign to the southern colonies in 1776 was, like British strategy generally, primarily an ad hoc response to a given set of particular conditions.<sup>13</sup> When these conditions changed, British responses had to be reformulated in order to meet the new situation. As has been said, the conditions in the Southern colonies had been so radically altered

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<sup>11</sup>Philip M. Hamer, "John Stuart's Indian Policy During the Early Months of the American Revolution," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XIII (Dec. 1930), 354.

<sup>12</sup>These letters are printed in Hamer, "The Wataugans and Cherokee," East Tenn. Publications, 111 (Dec. 1930), 108-126.

<sup>13</sup>Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, ix.

by the time the expedition was in full readiness that the assumptions upon which planning had hinged were no longer true.

The overall British capability to prosecute an offensive war had increased dramatically by the summer of 1776. By this time a large army of regular troops had arrived in America and was preparing to launch a major campaign in the middle colonies. The Loyalists in the colonies no longer were so necessary to British planning and were consequently rapidly dismissed from consideration for the time being.<sup>14</sup>

It seems a safe assumption, then, that while the Indians may have figured in the initial British plans for the Southern campaign of 1776, the situation, strategically and tactically, had become so altered that months before the initial Cherokee attacks, the British no longer had intentions of employing them in such a manner.

This is not to say, however, that the Cherokee nation and the frontier Loyalists were completely ignored or forgotten by all British officials. Many of the basic assumptions which had governed British planning in 1776 were retained throughout the war. Particularly it was expected that a substantial degree of Loyalist sympathy would continue to exist along the Southern frontier, ready to be tapped when conditions were once again favorable for a Southern campaign.<sup>15</sup> It was the task of John Stuart and his deputies to secure and strengthen Britain's Indian allies and to provide for the frontier Loyalists to the extent they were able. The actions

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<sup>14</sup>Smith, Ibid., 37.

<sup>15</sup>Smith, Ibid., 30.

Stuart took to fulfill this task and the manner in which the frontier patriots reacted to them were what finally precipitated the Cherokee attacks at a time and in a manner which were unfavorable to British interests and not intended by Stuart himself.

## Chapter 2

### British Indian Agents in the Cherokee Nation Designs and Actions

John Stuart, former British military officer and current British superintendent of Indian affairs in the Southern colonies, attempted from the very beginning of the conflict between Great Britain and her rebellious North American colonies to control the Indians in his jurisdiction and to prevent their making any indiscriminate attacks on the Southern frontier.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for pursuing such a policy are manifest. There was at this time a considerable degree of Loyalist sentiment among the settlers in the Southern backcountry. Until some method could be devised for identifying and differentiating between Loyalists and patriots, a series of wholesale, uncontrolled attacks could only lose the British whatever Loyalist support did exist by forcing all the frontiersmen to look to the newly-created patriot governments for protection.

On the other hand, Stuart would have to continue to provide the Indian tribes with arms, ammunition, and the other supplies which the British customarily had given them to retain their friendship. Abdication of this responsibility would have created a

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<sup>1</sup>Philip M. Hamer, "John Stuart's Indian Policy During the Early Months of the American Revolution," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XVII (Dec. 1930), passim.

vacuum on the frontier which the patriots could exploit at will. During the first nine months of 1775 the superintendent seems to have been occupied with the problem of supplying Britain's Indian allies in order to retain their friendship. His task was not made easier by the fact that patriot groups in the Carolinas, incensed by rumors that he was attempting to agitate among the Indians and precipitate an attack on the frontier, had driven him from Charleston and forced him to relocate in St. Augustine in June.

The first orders he received concerning projected employment of Indians for hostile purposes came from General Thomas Gage in early October 1775. Gage, apparently incensed by the patriot use of Indians against his position in Massachusetts, wrote:

You will now still have it in your power to hold a correspondence with the Indians, which I beg you may improve to the greatest advantage; and even when opportunity opens to make them take arms against his Majesty's enemies, and to distress them all in their power, for no term is now to be kept with them. The Rebels have themselves open'd the Door; they have brought down all the Savages they could against us here, who with their Rifle<sup>2</sup> men are continually firing on our advanced sentries.

Stuart took advantage of the considerable degree of leeway permitted him in this order to maintain his position essentially unchanged in relation to the Indian tribes and their use. He explicitly affirmed his intentions in a letter he sent to Alexander Cameron, his deputy agent in residence with the Cherokee nation, in December 1775.

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<sup>2</sup>As quoted in Philip M. Hamer, "The Wataugans and the Cherokee Indians in 1776," East Tennessee Historical Society Publications, III (Jan. 1931), 108.

I am now to acquaint You that I have received Instructions to employ the Indians in my Department to distress His Majesty's Rebellious Subjects by all practicable Means, that the Government and the Constitution may be reestablished in the distracted provinces.

Altho I do not construe this Instruction as an Order to attack the frontier Inhabitants of the provinces indiscriminately; by which Means the innocent might suffer and the guilty escape, yet in Consequence of it my Duty requires that no Time be lost in employing the Indians of the Different Nations to give all the Assistance in their Power to such of His Majesty's faithful Subjects as may already have taken or shall hereafter take arms, to resist the lawless Oppression of the Rebels and their Attempts to overturn<sup>3</sup> the Constitution and oppose His Majesty's Authority.

Even at this late date Stuart made no explicit statement to his trusted deputy indicating that the British plans for the campaign of 1776 included the use of Indian braves. He did, however, leave this alternative open by stressing the need for coordination of Indian and Loyalist efforts in the area. He almost certainly knew of the campaign itself and of the reliance upon Loyalist forces on which it was based. General Howe had received news of the proposed campaign two months previously, and John Stuart had specifically been designated to join the expeditionary fleet when it reached Cape Fear.<sup>4</sup> By the time, early in March 1776, when this meeting finally occurred, the situation had been so altered that it seems improbable he was ordered to employ the Indians in a hostile manner.

In the preceding months, however, he did what he could to insure that in the eventuality that the Indians were needed they would be

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<sup>3</sup>Hamer, Ibid., 109.

<sup>4</sup>Paul H. Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats (Chapel Hill, 1964), 23.

adequately supplied. He sent his brother, Henry Stuart, first to Pensacola and then to Mobile to organize and facilitate supply operations. He again counseled caution and moderation in dealing with the Indians, lest the precarious balance on the frontier be upset and along with it his plans for future use of Indians and Loyalists. As part of his final instructions to his brother Henry, Stuart wrote, "You will understand that an indiscriminate Attack upon the Provinces is not meant, but to act in Execution of any concerted Plan and to assist his Majesty's Troops and Friends in distressing the Rebels and bringing them to a sense of their Duty."<sup>5</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that Stuart at this point in time envisioned the creation of a kind of Loyalist state, or more properly a British-Loyalist sphere of influence, on the Southern frontier, co-existing and cooperating closely with the friendly Indian tribes. While this may appear at first to be a stronger statement than the situation warrants, I believe that the logic of the situation, the long-term British plans for military operations in the South, and certain of Henry Stuart's actions while he was in the Cherokee Nation all tend to indicate that something along these lines was a conscious British goal.

As was stated above, the unsuccessful termination of Sir Henry Clinton's 1776 campaign in the Southern colonies did not significantly alter one of the fundamental British assumptions upon which the campaign strategy had been based initially. The

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<sup>5</sup>Hamer, "Wataugans and Cherokees," East Tenn. Publications, III (Dec. 1930), 110.

British ministry continued to believe throughout the war that there existed a large reservoir of Loyalist sentiment in the Southern colonies, particularly among the frontier settlers, which could be tapped at will. While the Loyalists became much less of an immediate concern to British strategic planners in London during the second half of 1776, some attempt must have been made by the British officials in America to conserve Loyalist strength. This could be accomplished most efficiently and economically if a base could be provided which was relatively free from patriot harassment and well supplied with British goods. Paul Smith says, "The immediate object of employing the Loyalists was not always to achieve a military end. At times they were organized for practically no other reason than to afford them protection and to provide for their useful employment. . . ." <sup>6</sup> At least once during the war British desire to provide a Loyalist "haven" resulted in the formulation of a comprehensive plan centered on a section of the Maine coast. <sup>7</sup>

Perhaps more pertinent for this discussion, the creation of a Loyalist haven of some type appears to have been an objective of Clinton's campaign, especially after it became apparent that the original goals were unobtainable at this time. Paul Smith indicates that this desire was one of the prime motivating forces behind the British attack on Charleston. "For some time Clinton had given considerable thought to seizing a position that might be held with

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<sup>6</sup>Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, ix.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of this plan and its outcome see Smith, Ibid., 175-177.

a small force, where loyal refugees and fleeing royal officials might find asylum until the proper season for a southern campaign returned."<sup>8</sup> Since Stuart did confer with Clinton off Cape Fear in March 1776, he must have been made aware of Clinton's intentions and of the need for providing for those colonists loyal to the British cause. The situation in abstract, then, seems amenable to the hypothesis that John Stuart envisioned the creation of a Loyalist haven on the Southern frontier where it would be in close proximity with known areas of Loyalist sympathy. Henry Stuart's actions in the Cherokee Nation in the spring of 1776 afford some concrete indications that this indeed was the case.

Henry Stuart had been sent by his brother to Pensacola and Mobile late in 1775 to facilitate arrangements for supplying the friendly Indian tribes in order to retain their friendship. Early in March 1776, upon his arrival in Mobile, he was met by the Cherokee chieftain Dragging Canoe (Cherokee name Chiucanacina) who wanted to know why the customary supplies of arms, ammunition, and goods were no longer being sent to his people.<sup>9</sup> Dragging Canoe further complained that certain frontiersmen from Virginia and North Carolina had crossed the treaty line of 1770 into Indian territory and were building homes and clearing land for farming. He stated

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<sup>8</sup>Smith, Ibid., 28.

<sup>9</sup>Much of the following narrative comes from Hamer, "Wataugans and Cherokee," E. Tenn. Publications, III (Jan. 1931), 101-126. Hamer, writing in the imperial school vein throughout this article, has made extensive use of reports of British Indian agents which are found in the British Public Records Office.

that it was his intention and that of many of the younger Cherokee braves to attack these trespassers and drive them off the frontier.

Stuart, realizing that such an indiscriminate, uncontrolled attack could only be detrimental to British hopes for the area, determined to leave for the Cherokee towns immediately, taking thirty horse-loads of ammunition with him. Arriving in the Cherokee towns late in April, Stuart and his companion Alexander Cameron received such a favorable reception that in their report to John Stuart they expressed the conviction that the Cherokee would fight for the British when called upon to do so. Two other highly significant comments were contained in this report. The first was the report that "an oath of loyalty was administered to all white men in the nation."<sup>10</sup> The second, highly indicative of British intentions, was a request for enough arms and ammunition to supply not only the Cherokee, but also the frontier loyalists, with whom it was expected the Indians would cooperate.<sup>11</sup>

The only ominous sign mentioned was the extreme belligerency of the younger Cherokee braves towards those frontiersmen who had settled in the Watauga and Nollichucky regions in violation of the treaty of 1770. It was of the utmost importance that Stuart be successful in persuading these settlers to withdraw voluntarily back across the treaty line, for if this were accomplished it would perform a double service to the British cause. First, it would avoid the possibility of an immediate Indian attack on the frontier,

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<sup>10</sup>Hamer, Ibid., 111.

<sup>11</sup>Hamer, Ibid., 111.

something the British were in constant fear would occur before Loyalists had been separated from patriots and a degree of control and supervision over Indian actions was achieved. Secondly, it would clearly delineate the area of British influence and would further have received de facto recognition from the frontier patriots by the very act of their withdrawal.

Stuart was able to persuade the Cherokee chiefs to allow him to effect a voluntary withdrawal by the trespassing frontiersmen. The Indian leaders consented to wait twenty days, within which period Stuart could negotiate the removal of the settlers. His first letter to them, written on May 7 and carried to the settlements by the trader Isaac Thomas, seems to have been drafted in a moderate tone, warning them of their danger and stressing that the British were responsible for preventing a surprise attack.<sup>12</sup> Several letters were exchanged between Stuart and the Wataugans, the latter apparently trying to prolong the period of grace until they could apply to the Virginians for aid against the anticipated attack.

The letter in this series which received widespread publication in the colonies and seems to have galvanized the Virginia patriots into action was possibly a forgery, fabricated by the Wataugans to insure Virginia's support against the Indians. The letter read as follows:

Gentlemen--Some time ago Mr. Cameron and myself wrote you a letter by Mr. Thomas, and enclosed a talk we had with the Indians respecting the purchase which is reported you lately made of them on the River Watauga [sic],

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<sup>12</sup>Hamer, Ibid., 116.

Nollichuckey, S. C. We are since informed that you are under great apprehensions of the Indians doing mischief immediately. But it is not the desire of his Majesty to set his friends and allies, the Indians, on his liege subjects: Therefore, whoever you are that are willing to join his Majesty's forces as soon as they arrive at the Cherokee Nation, by repairing to the King's standard, shall find protection for themselves and their families, and be free from all danger whatever; yet, that his Majesty's officers may be certain which of you are willing to take up arms in his Majesty's just right, I have thought fit to recommend it to you and everyone that is desirous of preventing inevitable ruin to themselves and families, immediately to subscribe a written paper acknowledging their allegiance to his Majesty, King George, and that they are ready and willing, whenever they are called on, to appear in arms in defense of the British right in America; which paper, as soon as it is signed and sent to me, by safe hand, should any of the inhabitants be desirous of knowing how they are to be free from every kind of insult and danger, inform them, that his Majesty will immediately land an army in West Florida, march them through the Creek to the Chickasaw Nation, where five hundred warriors from each nation are to join them, and then come by Chota, who have promised their assistance, and then to take possession of the frontiers of North Carolina and Virginia, at the same time that his Majesty's forces make a division on the sea coast of those Provinces. If any of the inhabitants have any beef, cattle, flour, pork or horses to spare, they shall have a good price for them by applying to do, as soon as his Majesty's troops are embodied.

I am yours, etc.,  
Henry Stuart<sup>13</sup>

There is some evidence that this letter was indeed fabricated by the Wataugans, although not so conclusive that Hamer, an obvious Anglophile, would state this without reservation. Henry Stuart himself later stated the letter was a forgery in statements to his brother and in a letter to his former friend Edward Wilkinson. Wilkinson, who had known Stuart on the Carolina frontier and had since openly expressed his sympathy for the patriot cause, wrote

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<sup>13</sup>As quoted in J. G. M. Ramsey, The Annals of Tennessee (Charleston, 1853), 147-148.

him protesting the "incendiary" nature of the letter and claiming it would surely precipitate a border war between Indian and white. In his reply dated June 28, 1776, Stuart claimed, "The people of Watauga have made me the author of the most horrid falsehood, but I can assure you of one serious truth, that the Cherokees are not alone in the resolution to free themselves from the unjust encroachments of their neighbors. I have been informed that copies of the forged letter have been industriously circulated. As such practices are a scandal to any cause I trust you will take some pains in undeceiving the people."<sup>14</sup> He also reported to his brother John that Isaac Thomas, the liaison between him and the Wataugans, signed a deposition when he returned to the Cherokee towns stating that a Jessy Benton had forged the letter in question so expertly that no one could distinguish his handwriting from that of Stuart.<sup>15</sup>

However, if the letter was in fact a forgery it was at the same time representative of the goals for which Stuart was striving. There are numerous inferences to the creation of a Loyalist refuge on the frontier. His intention clearly was to attract as many Loyalists and essentially neutral frontiersmen into declaring their sympathy for the British cause and to force the unrepentant patriots from the frontier by the threat of attack. The reference to the British expedition from Florida evidently was

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<sup>14</sup>As quoted in Walter H. Mohr, Federal-Indian Relations 1774-1788 (Philadelphia, 1933), 53n.

<sup>15</sup>Hamer, "Wataugans and Cherokees," E. Tenn. Publications, III (Jan. 1931), 121.

used as an effective device to arouse fears, if by Stuart for its coercive value, if by Benton to maximize the potential danger facing the frontiersmen in the eyes of the Virginians.

Hamer in concluding his article says that the real point of controversy throughout was the question of illegal seizure of Indian land by Virginia and North Carolina frontiersmen and that the British agents did all in their power to prevent the outbreak of armed hostilities. That war was not avoided was due to the success of the Wataugans in identifying their own interests with those of the patriot cause.<sup>16</sup> Hamer implies that this was not the case, but he has misread the situation on the frontier. In a larger sense the interests of the Wataugans most certainly did coincide with those of the American patriots. If British influence was allowed to become paramount in the area, unchallenged by the patriots, it could only serve to weaken the position of the revolutionary governments in Virginia and North Carolina. They could not abdicate their responsibility for protection of the frontier and expect to retain any claim they had of exercising legitimate governmental powers.

In any case, the British agents rapidly lost what control of the situation they had previously been able to maintain. The arrival in the Cherokee nation of delegations from the Ottawa, Shawnee, and other Northern tribes urging war and the subsequent arrival of a British trader named Colbert with one hundred horseloads of ammunition

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<sup>16</sup>Hamer, Ibid., 123.

made war practically inevitable.<sup>17</sup> The explicitly stated British goal of preventing indiscriminate Indian attacks on the frontier was lost irrevocably. The implied goal of creation of a Loyalist refuge on the frontier hung on the success or failure of those attacks. If the Virginia and North Carolina patriots were able to respond adequately to the challenge presented, this goal would also be removed as a possible alternative. As will be shown in the following chapters, the patriots were more than able to meet that challenge.

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<sup>17</sup> John P. Brown, Old Frontiers: The Story of the Cherokee . . . (Kingsport, 1938), 146.

### Chapter 3

#### Spring and Summer 1776 Colonial Reaction to the Indian Threat on the Frontier

The remainder of this essay consists of a description and analysis of the reaction by Virginia patriot-frontiersmen and the revolutionary government to the Indian attacks which began during the summer of 1776. Hereafter when I speak of the "frontier" it will represent more than just the settlements in the Watauga and Nollichucky watersheds, which were the extreme leading edge of colonial migration. The eastern portions of Fincastle and Botetourt counties were in a transitional period at this time, rapidly filling with settlers and developing systematic administrative and judicial institutions responsible to the government in Williamsburg. This in itself differentiates the region from the Watauga settlement, which provided its own governmental institutions and was legally responsible to no colonial government. At the same time the Fincastle-Botetourt region was more unsettled, more in a state of constant flux, than the older, better organized settlements in eastern Virginia.

This "middle" position occupied by eastern Fincastle and Botetourt counties was important for the purposes of this study because their leaders were instrumental in bringing the plight of the frontiersmen to the attention of the revolutionary government. Their own response to the dangers of the situation was rapid, efficient, and resourceful. They were able to mobilize the men and supplies available in the

immediate vicinity in a remarkably short period of time, using them to reinforce the frontier until the more distant colonial government in Williamsburg could bring its own resources to bear in the conflict. Colonel William Preston, freeholder in Fincastle County and chairman of the Fincastle County Committee of Safety, provided the vital link in the communications network which stretched from the endangered frontier back to Williamsburg. At a time when communications systems were decidedly primitive by present-day standards, Preston performed admirably, transmitting vital information, which he received daily in the form of letters, both east and west.

Born in Newton, Ireland, November 25, 1729,<sup>1</sup> Colonel William Preston had emigrated with his parents, John and Elizabeth Patton Preston, to the colony of Virginia in 1740.<sup>2</sup> Educated by the Reverend John Craig, Preston was initially employed in posting the account books of Staunton merchants and in aiding his uncle, James Patton, in managing his large business enterprise. As a young man Preston served as deputy to Wallace Estill, High Sheriff of Augusta County, as well as clerk of the vestry and clerk of the county Court-Martial.<sup>3</sup> He rose to colony-wide prominence during the French and Indian War, in which he attained the rank of captain, commanding a company of rangers. In 1761 he married Susanna Smith of Hanover County and when, in the same year, the town of Staunton was incorporated,

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph A. Waddell, Annals of Augusta County, Virginia, From 1726 to 1871, 2nd ed. (Staunton, Virginia, 1902), 57.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 120.

he was appointed to serve on its board of trustees.<sup>4</sup> Preston's stature in the county continued its steady rise and he was elected to represent Augusta in the Virginia House of Burgesses for the 1766 and 1768-1769 sessions.<sup>5</sup>

Preston moved to Botetourt County when it was created from a portion of Augusta County in 1769 and immediately accepted positions of importance and power in the county administration. At the first meeting of the county court on February 14, 1770, he was commissioned a county justice, serving there with William Fleming and other prominent frontiersmen.<sup>6</sup> At the same time he was qualified by the court to act as a county surveyor, an escheator, a coroner, and a colonel of the militia. In 1773 he moved his residence once again, on this occasion to an estate he purchased and named Smithfield, in the newly created county of Fincastle. He served in a number of capacities during the Revolutionary War in behalf of Fincastle County, and died at Smithfield on June 29, 1783 after having been taken ill the previous day at a regimental muster.<sup>7</sup>

The first information which Colonel Preston received regarding the situation on the frontier was in the form of a deposition signed by Gabriel Shoat before John Montgomery and James McGavode on May 13, 1776.<sup>8</sup> Shoat informed the Fincastle County leaders that an Indian

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>8</sup>Deposition of Gabriel Shoat, May 13, 1776, The Preston and Virginia Papers of the Draper Collection of Manuscripts, microfilm, 400, 38, Colonial Williamsburg Research Center, Williamsburg, Virginia.

trader, Isaac Thomas, had arrived in the "neighborhood" on the eleventh of May carrying letters from the Cherokee Indians to the Watauga settlers. The letters demanded that the Wataugans abandon their homes and retreat back into Virginia territory or suffer the consequences of an immediate attack. Thomas also seems to have said, through Shoat, that the British agents Alexander Cameron, Henry Stuart, and Captain Nathan Gist, a former Virginia militia officer, were agitating the Indians and supplying them with arms and ammunition. Thomas feared that the war had already begun, since at least one man had been killed and scalped in the Powell's Valley settlement.

The next day Preston received a letter from Major Anthony Bledsoe, who was at that time in the Watauga settlement itself, which substantiated much of what Shoat had sworn in the deposition.<sup>9</sup> Bledsoe further indicated that the Cherokee letters had severely alarmed the Watauga settlers and that something would have to be done to quiet their fears. He requested that Preston make available an additional quantity of powder (unspecified amount) over and above the fifty weight which had already been allotted.

On May 16 Preston received another letter from the frontier, again indicating that the Watauga settlers were in a precarious position and that help was needed immediately.<sup>10</sup> The letter contained a request for an immediate shipment of powder, which would help to steady the nerves of a great many of the settlers who were

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<sup>9</sup>Anthony Bledsoe to William Preston, May 14, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 39.

<sup>10</sup>Gilbert Christian to William Preston, May 16, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 40.

on the verge of flight. Two further bits of information included in the letter indicate the resourcefulness of the frontiersmen in acting quickly to provide for their own defense. The first was the mention that a Captain William Brisco was already raising men for a militia unit, though no hint was given as to the number of men he was able to recruit. The second was the fact that the settlers had raised money for the powder they had requested, and the bearer of the letter, James King, was prepared to pay cash on the spot and carry the powder back with him to the Watauga settlements.

On May 22 Preston received the first "proof" of the frontier situation when Major Bledsoe wrote him a second time, now including copies of the Cherokee letters (the originals were reportedly sent to the North Carolina Convention).<sup>11</sup> Bledsoe again indicated that the frontiersmen were very uneasy and suggested that two hundred pounds of powder be immediately shipped to the frontier and sold to the settlers. He also requested that Preston arrange for a meeting of the Fincastle County Committee of Safety to formulate and organize adequate defensive measures which could be implemented at once.

Preston also received a copy of a letter from a Captain William Cooke to Major Bledsoe, possibly Bledsoe having included it with his own letter of the twenty-second although Preston noted on the back that it had come the twenty-seventh.<sup>12</sup> Cooke apparently was

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<sup>11</sup>Bledsoe to Preston, Captain Shelby's home, May 22, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 40.

<sup>12</sup>Captain William Cooke to Major Anthony Bledsoe, Amos Eaton's, May 27, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 44.

desirous of indicating widespread patriot sentiment on the frontier as he referred several times to the "glorious cause" of Americans in fighting for "independence of liberty and property." He also saw quite clearly one of the dangers inherent in the frontier situation when he mentioned that it would be unfortunate to have to fight the war on two fronts, one on the coastal regions against the British regulars and the other on the frontier against Britain's Indian allies. Even if this were the case, however, he reminded Preston of the duty of all patriotic men to aid the Wataugans, who, he said, had in the past rendered many vital services in behalf of the Virginians.

On May 30 Preston received another letter from the Watauga settlement, this time written by one of the leaders, John Carter.<sup>13</sup> Carter, who at this time was corresponding with the British agents in the Cherokee nation in an effort to gain time for the Wataugans to construct a proper defensive system, provided many details on the day to day events occurring on the frontier. Carter received much of this information from two Indian traders, John Bryan and Isaac Thomas, who had returned from another mission to the Cherokee towns just the previous day. It was obviously Carter's intention to demonstrate to Preston the fact that the British agents were the prime motivating factors in bringing about the Indian attacks. He spoke of the intimidation of frontiersmen with patriotic leanings by Cameron and a body of Tories, thereby hoping to identify clearly the conjunction of Wataugan interests with those of patriotic

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<sup>13</sup>John Carter to William Preston, Watauga, May 30, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 45.

Virginians and impress this fact on Preston's mind. According to Carter the British were vigorously prosecuting a policy of extracting oaths of allegiance to the king from white settlers on the frontier, coercing those who appeared to have patriotic sympathies. A further indication of true British intentions was the fact that Captain Gist had told Isaac Thomas that if the Wataugans were really desirous of retaining their royal allegiance (as apparently they had claimed in certain of the conciliatory letters written in order to gain time) they had nothing to fear, but should move with all their belongings into the Cherokee nation and live in peace with the Indians.

Preston must have been alarmed by the news contained in Carter's letter, as the threat to the patriot cause should the British succeed in executing their plans was quite apparent. By the end of May 1776, Preston had already received numerous statements as to the danger on the frontier and several indications that the Wataugans were determined to provide for their own defense to the limit of their resources. There is no question, however, that they could fight little more than a delaying action, hoping to gain enough time so that the Virginians could organize themselves and come to their rescue.

An indication of the degree of alarm with which the frontiersmen occupying the "middle" position viewed the situation was contained in a letter from the North Carolinian Matthew Brodes to Major Bledsoe.<sup>14</sup> Brodes mentioned the possibility of an Indian

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Brodes to Major Anthony Bledsoe, May 30, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 46.

attack and, somewhat incredibly, offered to raise two thousand men immediately to aid the Wataugans. This offer has been termed incredible because of the logistical and supply problems which would have been faced by such a body of men. This is about equal to the number which Christian eventually led against the Cherokee five months later after a great deal of preparations had been made. Still, the degree of alarm on the frontier must have been enormous if, only three weeks after the first indications of British moves were received, Brodes could have contemplated raising such a large force. It is unfortunate that no further mention is made of Brodes' proposal and consequently it has been impossible to determine how the offer was received and if any subsequent action was taken on it.

Beginning in June Preston began to receive the first indication that letters he had written to Williamsburg had been received favorably and that action was being taken. Early in June he received a letter from the Williamsburg Committee of Safety concerning action taken on his request for powder.<sup>15</sup> He was informed that upon consideration of his letter (no date given) which contained the affidavits of Gabriel Shoat and John Ramsey, the committee had deemed the situation sufficiently alarming to grant his request for additional supplies of powder. Accordingly, two hundred pounds of powder over and above that amount already allotted were to be shipped to Fincastle and Botetourt counties, where the county

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<sup>15</sup>J. Beckley to William Preston, Williamsburg, May 27, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 48.

lieutenants would see to its proper dispersal. Apparently Preston had forwarded the frontiersmen's request for powder almost as soon as he had received their letters, and his recommendation carried sufficient weight in Williamsburg to receive prompt action there.

A letter he received on June 8, 1776 is interesting because it indicates that the mention of a British expedition from East Florida to the Cherokee nation was not considered very likely or practical.<sup>16</sup> William Fleming, who wrote the letter in response to one received from Preston, said that he was in agreement with Preston that the route allegedly laid out by Stuart could not be traversed easily. Fleming added that he could not believe the Cherokee really wished a rupture with the colonies, but that since the American army before Quebec had been dispersed, he looked for a good deal of "mischief" on the frontier. In order to avoid the possibility that the situation would get completely out of hand, Fleming requested that additional supplies, particularly of powder, be sent to the frontiersmen.

Colonel William Fleming, who occupied the same position and performed similar services for Botetourt county as Preston did for Fincastle County at this time, was a well respected frontiersman-gentleman with a background similar in some regards to that of Preston. He was born in Jedburgh, Scotland on February 18, 1729 to Leonard and Dorothea Fleming and was closely allied to several Scottish noble families.<sup>17</sup> He was educated at the University of

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<sup>16</sup>William Fleming to Preston, June 8, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 47.

<sup>17</sup>Hugh Blair Grigsby, The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788, II (Richmond, 1891), 40.

Edinburgh, graduated as a medical surgeon, and shortly thereafter enlisted in the British navy as a surgeon's mate. After brief service in the navy, including a period of imprisonment in Spain after his ship was captured, Fleming resolved to resign his commission and emigrate to the American colonies, landing in Norfolk in August, 1755. He immediately enlisted in the Virginia Regiment to serve against the French and their Indian allies and was commissioned an ensign on August 25, 1755.<sup>18</sup> For the next eight years he served continuously on the frontier, taking part in several campaigns and eventually attaining the rank of captain (May 22, 1762).<sup>19</sup>

In 1763 Fleming resigned his military commission and began a career as a surgeon on the Virginia frontier, settling in Staunton, Augusta County. In the same year he married Anne Christian, daughter of Israel Christian, a prosperous merchant with large western landholdings, and sister of William Christian, prominent frontiersman and commander of the 1776 Cherokee expedition. After several prosperous years in Augusta county, during which time he served as vestryman (November 1764) and county justice (May 1765), he moved in 1768 to an estate, Bellmont, which he received from his father-in-law, in what shortly would become Botetourt county.<sup>20</sup> At the first session of the county court of Botetourt he was commissioned, along with William Preston, as one of the first county

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 43.

justices (February 14, 1770).<sup>21</sup> In March 1714 Fleming was commissioned a lieutenant-colonel of the Botetourt County militia. He participated in the Battle of Point Pleasant in Dunmore's War, during the course of the battle receiving three wounds which made him a semi-invalid for the remainder of his life.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of his disabilities, however, he was commissioned county lieutenant of Botetourt by the committee of safety on April 1, 1776, in which capacity he acted energetically to create a defensive system for the Virginia frontier.<sup>23</sup> From May 1777 through October 1779 he served as representative of Botetourt, Washington, Montgomery, and Kentucky in the Virginia Senate; in 1780 he became a member of the Council and for the brief period June 1-12, 1781 he was the acting chief executive of Virginia.<sup>24</sup> After his long, meritorious career of military and civil service to Virginia as both colony and state, he died on August 5, 1795 at his family estate, Belmont.<sup>25</sup>

It is apparent from the tenor of Fleming's letter, as well as the one from William Christian which arrived the same day, that these men all believed that the possibilities for avoiding war were still good so long as rapid measures were taken to demonstrate

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<sup>21</sup>William D. Hoyt, *Colonel William Fleming on the Virginia Frontier, 1755-1783* (unpubl. Ph. D. diss, Johns Hopkins University, 1940), 53.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>23</sup>See Armistead Churchill Gordon in DAB J.V. "Fleming, William."

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Grigsby, History Virginia Convention, 52.

the determination of the patriots to defend their advanced settlements. Christian's letter, a rather lengthy one, included a discussion of all of the activities on the frontier in the previous month. He indicated agreement with Preston's actions in advising the Wataugans to abandon their settlements and relocate on the Virginia side of the boundary between that state and the Indian nation. This is the only mention I have found on this subject and apparently it was not indicative of a reluctance to aid the Wataugans on the part of Preston and others as the Virginians certainly did not refuse to support the settlers on the Watauga when they did not heed this advice.

Christian himself did not believe that the Watauga settlements were the real cause of the Indians' actions. He said he was sure this was merely the excuse used by the British agents in fomenting trouble for the patriots everywhere and he added that he was "very glad to find that the ministerial gentry has been so rapid in disclosing without further disguise their aim, . . ." <sup>26</sup> Christian also commented on several of Preston's actions in preparing a defense for the frontier, the first mention I have seen indicating that Preston had not been content with merely transmitting correspondence to other concerned parties. In an indication that some trouble in raising an adequate number of militia men might be expected, Christian said he would advise Preston "to order a third or a half [of all available militia] instead of a fourth of your militia to be in readiness, if you order a third perhaps

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<sup>26</sup>William Christian to Preston, Smithfield, June 8, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 49.

more than a fourth can be had, if all appear you will not have too many."<sup>27</sup>

Further on in his letter Christian stated that he wished enough time remained so that messengers could be sent from the Virginia Convention to the Cherokee villages, declaring the peaceful intentions of the frontiersmen and warning the Indians they were planning their own destruction if they proceeded with their proposed attack. He seems to have thought at this time it might just be possible to avert the attack if a sufficient demonstration of colonial military strength were made near the Cherokee frontier. He continued, however, that he doubted if the Convention could be convinced this was necessary until further proof of the Indians' hostile intentions was received from the frontier. In spite of this, Christian assured Preston he would do all in his power to get the Convention to take immediate steps to provide for frontier defense and asked him to communicate this to the Wataugans.

In concluding his letter Christian spoke of what he considered the real danger in the frontier situation. He said that it was possible that the "people of Watauga may be frightened into a confederacy opposing the patriot cause unless steps were taken to secure their loyalty."<sup>28</sup> Here Christian has essentially stated what I consider to be the intentions of the British agents at this time-- the creation of a Loyalist refuge in the Indian territory. Christian

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<sup>27</sup> Christian to Preston; Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Christian to Preston; Ibid.

stated he would do all he could to counteract this tendency and urged Preston to make the frontiersmen fully aware that such a course of action could result only in their own destruction.

A week after having received this advice from Colonel Christian, Preston wrote a letter to Edmund Pendleton in Williamsburg, giving a report of the situation as it then stood, the measures which had already been taken by the frontiersmen for their own defense, and an assessment of the expected needs of the frontiersmen in terms of supplies and troops.<sup>29</sup> Preston reported that, in response to a resolution by the "Honorable Convention," a committee meeting had been held in Fincastle County and that two companies of fifty men each had been formed. One company was stationed on the frontier, on the Great Island in the Holston River. The other was divided, with thirty men being sent to a place called Rye Cave on the Clinch River and the remainder being sent to Fort Chiswell to guard the ammunition. He immediately added that this number of men was insufficient to provide for a proper defense when the Cherokee did finally attack in numbers.

Preston went on to say that the Wataugans had taken certain measures for their own defense as well, raising one hundred men who were stationed between the settlements and the Indians. They had also purchased one hundred pounds of powder and two hundred pounds of lead, which Preston had sent them immediately. Apparently the patriots were quick to deal with suspected Loyalists among the frontier settlers, using much the same methods as had Cameron

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<sup>29</sup> William Preston to Edmund Pendleton, Fincastle, June 15, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 50.

previously. Preston mentioned that Captain John Shelby from Holston and a Captain Robinson from Watauga had rounded up approximately seventy suspected Loyalists and required them to swear an oath of allegiance to the patriot cause. He added that a number of German settlers were thought to be disloyal and indicated he wanted instructions as to how to deal with them "in case their obstinacy causes them to go to dangerous lengths."<sup>30</sup>

At this point it was apparently still felt that war might possibly be avoided. Preston said that Isaac Thomas had once again returned to the Watauga settlements, saying that he believed the Indians would agree to "reasonable" terms if letters were sent immediately professing the friendship of the colonists for them. The committee of safety did this at once, as Thomas declared he could not wait until such letters could be forwarded from Williamsburg. The only recent information he had received from the frontier spoke of a great deal of Indian activity in Powell's valley and a report that a Tory, one Mr. Robinson, was leading a band of forty white men in the area, trying to recruit men for the British and Indian side. Immediate measures had been taken in an attempt to verify this last bit of information, but no answer had been received at the time the letter was written.

The final communication Preston received in the month of June came from the Williamsburg Committee of Safety, detailing certain measures to be taken for defense of the frontier.<sup>31</sup> Six more

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<sup>30</sup>Preston to Pendleton; Idem.

<sup>31</sup>Edmund Pendleton to William Preston, Williamsburg, June 20, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 51.

companies of militia were to be raised, four from Fincastle County and one each from Augusta and Botetourt counties. In the event that actual hostilities were to break out, the county lieutenants of each were empowered to request reserves from other counties less hard pressed. The committee also had approved of the action of sending an envoy to the Cherokee nation [presumably this refers to Isaac Thomas], in an attempt to prevent or at least delay the invasion.

Thus far then, by late June, a great deal of preparation had already been made for the defense of the frontier, largely by the frontiersmen themselves, and the government in Williamsburg had been informed of the situation. The fact that no real hostilities had as yet broken out seems to indicate that neither side in the conflict wanted a war if its ends could be realized by peaceful means. It was a time of negotiation and preparation, as each side tried to secure its power in its respective region before taking any offensive measures.

During the month of July the move towards actual hostilities escalated slowly, with the first reports coming in of actual Indian depredations on the frontier, as yet, however, only among the more isolated settlers. The large bulk of the frontier inhabitants in the Watauga region had taken refuge in stockades and block-houses, abandoning crops and livestock, and the Indians seem to have been content until late in the month to attack stragglers and steal livestock. Most of the information which Preston received in July came from the almost daily letters he got from Captain William Russell.

Captain Russell was well qualified to assess the relative dangers and military necessities of the current situation on the frontier, having served for a number of years previously as an officer in the colonial militia during border conflicts. Born in Orange County, Virginia, 1735, the son of Lieutenant Colonel William and Mary Henley Russell, and educated at the College of William and Mary, he began his military career in the French and Indian War, attaining the rank of captain in command of a company of rangers.<sup>32</sup> He was an active participant in the Battle of Point Pleasant (October 10, 1774) and commanded the garrison of the fort at Kanawha until he was relieved by Governor Dunmore in July, 1775.<sup>33</sup> During this same year Russell was elected a member of the Fincastle County Committee of Safety, and the following year (1776) he was elected to represent Fincastle County in the House of Burgesses.<sup>34</sup> Russell served throughout the Revolutionary War as a colonel (commissioned Dec. 19, 1776) in the continental army, eventually being brevetted Brigadier General on November 3, 1783.<sup>35</sup> Following the end of hostilities he represented Washington County in the state assembly and senate for several terms until he was taken ill and died at Fort Royal, Virginia in 1793.<sup>36</sup>

On the seventh Russell wrote to Preston concerning problems

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<sup>32</sup>Elizabeth Y. Russell, "Brigadier General William Russell of Virginia," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, LII (1944), 268.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 266.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 268.

he was having with the militia troops under his command.<sup>37</sup>

Apparently many of these troops had been drawn from north and central Virginia, as Russell says they were worried about the possibility of a Shawnee attack upon their homes while they were away. He requested that Preston attempt to raise new companies of militia to replace these men as quickly as possible. He also informed Preston that Thomas Madison had been appointed commissary "in convention" and would act in this capacity until an executive decision could be reached to make the appointment official.

On the seventeenth Russell wrote again, with the information that Isaac Thomas had signed an oath indicating that a "large body" of warriors were on the march towards the white settlements from the Overhill Cherokee tribes.<sup>38</sup> He urgently requested that Preston, in his capacity as county lieutenant of Fincastle, send 150 armed men to repel the invasion.

On the twentieth Russell went into more detail in describing actions he had taken to meet the attack which he felt was imminent.<sup>39</sup> The frontiersmen's strength in the area he calculated at not more than 240 men, a decidedly insufficient force to cope with the Indian warriors. He also examined the situation at the lead mines and felt that the garrison stationed there needed reinforcement, which he promptly did with thirty men, also ordering them to build a

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<sup>37</sup> William Russell to William Preston, July 7, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 53.

<sup>38</sup> William Russell to William Preston, July 17, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 54.

<sup>39</sup> William Russell to William Preston, July 20, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 55.

wooden stockade for further protection. Again supply problems were evident, Russell complaining that over two hundred pounds of powder stored at Fort Chiswell were useless. He said that he had written to Colonel Fleming, requesting fifty additional men and a sufficient quantity of powder to last until fresh supplies could be obtained.

On the twenty-third Russell wrote two letters to Preston, the first of these again discussing problems with raising sufficient numbers of men to defend the frontier,<sup>40</sup> and the second along much the same lines, detailing measures taken to fortify and protect the lead mines particularly. He also added that he had received news of a great victory by the frontiersmen over the Cherokees "near the big island."<sup>41</sup> Although Russell goes no further than this, an account of the battle did appear in the Virginia Gazette in August, in the form of a letter written by the principal officers involved. Their account of the actions was as follows:

On the 19th [July] our scouts returned and informed us that they had discovered where a great number of Indians were making into the settlement, upon which alarm, the few men that were stationed at Eaton completed a breastwork, sufficiently strong, with the assistance of what men were there, to have repelled a considerable number, sent expresses to the different stations, and collected all the forces in one body, and the morning after about 170 turned out in search of the enemy. We marched in two divisions, with flankers on each side and scouts before. Our scouts discovered upwards of twenty meeting us and fired on them. They returned the fire, but our men rushed on them with such violence that they

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<sup>40</sup>William Russell to William Preston, July 23, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 58.

<sup>41</sup>William Russell to William Preston, July 23, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 57. Although the sources are unclear at times, "big island" and "Long Island" appear to be used interchangeably. The latter term is used in the map on page 68.

were obliged to make a very precipitate retreat. We took ten bundles, and a good deal of plunder, and great reason to think some of them were wounded. This small skirmish happened on ground very disadvantageous for our men to pursue, though it was with great difficulty our officers could restrain their men. A council was held, and it was thought adviseable to return, as we imagined there was a large party not far off. We accordingly returned, and had not marched more than a mile when a number not inferior to ours attacked us in the rear. Our men sustained the attack with great bravery and intrepidity and immediately formed a line. The Indians endeavored to surround us, but were prevented by the uncommon fortitude and vigilance of Captain James Shelby, who took possession of an eminence that prevented their design. Our line of battle extended about a quarter of a mile. We killed 13 on the spot, whom we found, and have the greatest reason to believe that we could have found many more, had we had time to search for them. There were streams of blood every way, and it was generally thought there was never so much execution done in so short a time on the frontiers. Never did troops fight with greater calmness than ours did. The Indians attacked us with the greatest fury imaginable, and made the most vigorous efforts to surround us. Our Spies really deserved the greatest applause. We took a great deal of plunder and many guns, and had only four men slightly wounded. The rest of the troops are in high spirits and eager for another engagement. We have the greatest reason to believe they are pouring in great numbers on us, and beg the assistance of our friends.

[Signed] James Thompson  
 James Shelby  
 William Buchanan  
 John Campbell  
 William Cocke<sup>42</sup>  
 Thomas Madison

The Virginia Gazette contained further references to skirmishes on the frontier which do not appear in William Preston's papers. On August 9 Purdie printed excerpts from letters written by "officers of rank in Fincastle." One gave details of an Indian attack on the fort at Watauga, which lasted all day on July 21, in which it

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<sup>42</sup>Purdie's Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg), August 2, 1776.

was reported several Indians had been wounded as evidenced by the quantities of blood on the field. The Indians withdrew but shortly thereafter returned and laid siege to the fort. A messenger escaped from the fort after six days and got news of the siege to the Holston River settlements, which responded by immediately dispatching a relief force, expected to arrive at the fort on the 29th.<sup>43</sup>

These successes were met by considerable elation on the part of the Virginians, but none of the basic plans for dealing with the frontier crisis seem to have been altered in light of them. Russell wrote Preston four days after the victory at the big island, mentioning a letter he had just received from Watauga detailing the great distress of those settlers. He may here be referring to the siege of the fort, though there is no way to tell if this was indeed the case.<sup>44</sup> He also mentioned that an encampment of forty Cherokee was to be attacked the following day at their encampment below Kennedy Mill by one hundred rangers.<sup>45</sup> Besides the usual call for reinforcements, Russell indicated what was becoming an increasing problem for the frontiersmen, sufficient supplies of food. He requested that cattle be sent immediately, as the Indians had driven off large numbers of both cattle and

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<sup>43</sup>Purdie's Va. Gazette (Williamsburg), Aug. 9, 1776.

<sup>44</sup>William Russell to William Preston, July 24, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 59.

<sup>45</sup>Although in subsequent letters Russell did not mention the outcome of this attack, it was apparently quite successful. See Purdie's Va. Gazette (Williamsburg), Aug. 9, 1776 for a brief account of the action.

horses, unguarded because their owners were in the forts for protection.

Further information which Russell sent Preston in July was much along the same lines as the above letters, discussing problems of raising sufficient militia, always coupled with a request for reinforcements, and giving indications of the Indian advance and the depredations which accompanied it. Thus far the frontiersmen had been required almost wholly to provide for their own defense, and, it seems from the accounts available, they did an admirable job of it. It is equally obvious that by the end of July they had done all within their means to withstand the Indians and massive aid from the Virginians was now required. While they had defeated the Indians in several instances they had been unable to drive them out of the region. Perhaps the most dangerous new development was the growing scarcity of food. If the Indians could not defeat the frontiersmen by force of arms, it was possible they could starve them into submission if aid were not immediately forthcoming.

It was just at this time, late in July, that the first indications that the frontiersmen's many requests for aid in the form of troops as well as supplies would be met. Preston wrote a letter to someone in Williamsburg on July 30, giving further details of the Indians' progress along the Holston River. The most important information was his acknowledgment of a letter he had received on the 22d of July (apparently this was not preserved) telling him for the first time that the Council had initiated plans for sending an expedition against the Indians.<sup>46</sup> The letter he received

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<sup>46</sup>William Preston to \_\_\_\_\_, July 30, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 61.

apparently also contained certain instructions as to actions he was to take to prepare for the expedition. He mentioned that he would immediately engage a number of men to supply the army with provisions, adding that he could not undertake to do this himself, but that he would see to it that no time was lost in making preparations. Continuing on the theme of supplies, he added that they would have to be carried in casks on wagons, since it would be impossible to secure enough bags for pack horses to be employed. Neither was there enough cloth on the frontier to make tents for the militia. Significantly, he included the suggestion that money be made available for immediate payment in cash, as the frontiersmen had suffered from a lack of payments in 1774 during Dunmore's expedition against the Shawnee.

Preston further indicated that additional troops were in fact necessary because between six and eight hundred Cherokee were opposing the limited forces then on the frontier. He added, almost prophetically, that the Indians would not remain tied to their towns in static defensive positions, because of the river by which they would escape easily with all their families. He ended by saying that he had just written to a Colonel Calloway urging him to prepare as much lead for the expedition as possible.

Although Preston received further important communications during the month of August, the focus of action moved from the frontier to Williamsburg and the eastern region of the state, where plans for the expedition were rapidly carried into execution.

On August first the Council ordered the keeper of the public magazine at New Castle to deliver one ton of gunpowder to Colonel

Charles Lewis for use by the expedition. On the same day the Council ordered the issuance of a commission appointing Colonel William Christian colonel of the first battalion and commander-in-chief of the expeditionary forces. Included were instructions to Colonel Christian regarding the desired goals for which the expedition had been organized. As was typical with this sort of order, a great deal of leeway was given in order that Christian could shape his actions to conform with the dictates of a fluid situation. Only two details in the general instructions seem to have been mandatory. The first was that Christian was to correspond with the commander of the North Carolina troops which were to undertake an attack against the lower Cherokee towns at about the same time as the Virginia expedition was to attack the Overhill Cherokee.<sup>47</sup> The obvious intention was to coordinate the troop movements in the two attacks as nearly as possible in order that nearly simultaneous blows would fall on the Cherokee Nation. The second order was a directive that Christian write the Governor and Council from time to time during the course of the expedition, including all relevant details and requesting explanations of certain orders if he needed them. The final order issued by the Council this day was to Colonel Charles Lewis, commander of the Second Battalion. He was directed to have his captains march their companies to their respective counties, recruit new troops and discharge those unfit for service in the present campaign, and proceed to the Big Island on the Holston River, the

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<sup>47</sup>H. R. McIlwaine, ed., Official Letters of the Governors of Virginia, I, Letters of Patrick Henry (Richmond, 1926), 21-22.

site of the general rendezvous.<sup>48</sup>

The need to supply adequately Christian's proposed expedition with arms, ammunition, and food occupied a good deal of time and energy both in Williamsburg and on the frontier during August. Preston began to arrange for the purchase of food by the end of the third week in July, and on August first the Council ordered one ton of gunpowder for the expedition. On August 2 Preston reported on progress made to the President of the Council, John Page.<sup>49</sup> In accordance with an order from Council, Preston appointed Captains Shelby and Madison to supply the army with provisions, informing them immediately by express. So that no time would be lost he also advertised for beef and flour, promising "ready money" for all that his men could obtain. The frontiersmen were in short supply of flints for rifles at this time, and Preston requested that a sufficient supply be made available from Williamsburg. He also included in this letter the same information about lead supplies and the use of wagons for transporting the supplies.

On August 6 the Council requisitioned further supplies for the expedition. A letter was dispatched to Colonel Thomas Fleming, commander of the Ninth Battalion, ordering him to send 10,000 weight of sulphur to Williamsburg, part of which was to be used in making gunpowder for the expedition.<sup>50</sup> An additional 1,000 weight of powder and 2,000 flints were also ordered from the keeper of the

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<sup>48</sup>McIlwaine, ed., Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>William Preston to John Page, Fincastle, August 2, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 65.

<sup>50</sup>McIlwaine, ed., Official Letters, 25.

magazine to be sent to Colonel Christian's force. Preston was informed of the Council's actions in a letter he received on August 7.<sup>51</sup> The final reference to the gathering of supplies for the expedition that I have found was contained in a letter from James Buchanan to Colonel Preston in the second week of August.<sup>52</sup> Buchanan apparently was one of the purchasing agents Preston had sent out to accumulate supplies. It seems that Preston had made an excellent choice in Buchanan. He reported that he could buy at least 100,000 pounds of flour at nine shillings per hundred-weight. More flour could be had if need be, but the dryness of the summer had caused a slowing in mill operations and extra time would be needed. He had likewise made arrangements for the purchase of one hundred head of cattle in the area between the North and South James Rivers, and said he awaited the arrival of good drovers before purchasing more or trying to move those already obtained. A quantity of wagons, complete with casks, had been obtained from a Mr. Barnard and would be available for transportation services almost immediately.

Perhaps one reason no further mention was made of problems with the purchase of provisions is that nothing more was needed if Buchanan was indeed successful in accumulating the amount he spoke of. The daily bread allowance for the Continental Army in

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew Lewis to William Preston, Williamsburg, August 7, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 67.

<sup>52</sup> James Buchanan to William Preston, August 11, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 37.

1775 was one pound per man.<sup>53</sup> If this ration is used as a guideline, Buchanan had purchased enough flour to feed the entire expedition for something over fifty days, there being about 2,000 men total involved. Christian, in his reports while in the field, never mentioned a supply problem and, in fact, had a sufficient surplus to give several wagonloads of flour to the hard-pressed Wataugans.<sup>54</sup>

On the question of achieving a close coordination between the attacks of the North Carolina and Virginia expeditions, not a great deal was written and I assume, for lack of evidence, that it was too difficult an undertaking to send messengers continually between the two camps. John Page, President of the Council, corresponded twice with the North Carolina Council of Safety, the first giving details of the situation on the frontier. The second, somewhat more informative, included thanks for North Carolina's prompt compliance with Virginia's request for troops, three hundred of which were sent. Page added in this case that the combined force would amount to 1750 men, the lowest estimate for the size of the expedition I have seen.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, by late August 1776, in the space of about one month, the Virginia government, working in close coordination with such

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<sup>53</sup>The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present, compiled by the Bureau of the Census (Stanford, 1965), SER. Z 390-391, 774.

<sup>54</sup>William Christian to Patrick Henry, 6 mile camp, October 6, 1776, Executive Papers of Virginia - Patrick Henry, Virginia State Archives, Richmond.

<sup>55</sup>McIlwaine, ed., Official Letters, 27.

frontiersmen as Thomas Preston and Thomas Madison, the commissary for the expedition, as well as William Christian, had succeeded in planning for and provisioning a rather massive expedition against the Overhill Cherokee towns.

The next chapter will include an account of the final preparations for the beginning of the expedition and a description of the expedition itself. It was just at this crucial point in the preparations for the expedition that, seemingly, no one had time to write letters. Very few details of the final days in Virginia before the rendezvous at Big Island are available. However, certain reasonable assumptions as to the actual events can and will be made.

## Chapter 4

### Colonel William Christian's Cherokee Expedition

At the same time that supplies were being requisitioned, collected, and shipped in August and early September, the commanders of the Cherokee expedition were preparing their men for the coming campaign. Charles Lewis, colonel of the Second Battalion of Virginia militia, received a directive from the Council on August first to order the captains of each company in his command to march their men to the counties in which they had been raised. Apparently a significant proportion of the men were from counties in western Virginia. General Andrew Lewis seemed to indicate this when he said in a letter, "I recommended discharging the Second Battalion at this place because they were from the county from which our frontiers could have assistance and had brought with them most of the firearms that were serviceable."<sup>1</sup> If indeed the Second Battalion was drawn largely from western counties, two additional purposes were served by choosing it for the campaign. First, when the companies had reached full strength, they would be within easy marching distance of the rendezvous site on the Big Island. Second, frontiersmen serving in the militia often became dispirited and unreliable when they

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<sup>1</sup>General Andrew Lewis to William Preston, Williamsburg, August 7, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 67.

felt their own families and property were endangered by hostile Indians. Sending them with their companies back to the frontier would provide the psychological advantage of having the men serve close to home.

The ideal structure of a militia company, in terms of personnel and equipment, in Virginia was described in the report of a special committee on military defence to the Richmond Convention of 1775. The section on the infantry stated, "each company of infantry is to consist of sixty-eight rank and file, to be commanded by one captain, two lieutenants, one ensign, four sergeants, four corporals, have a drummer and be furnished with a drum and colors.

. . . every man be provided with a good rifle, or with a common flintlock, bayonet, and cartouch box, and also with a tomahawk, one pound of gunpowder, and four pounds of ball at least, fitted to the bore of his gun; that he be clothed in a hunting shirt, by way of uniform; . . .<sup>2</sup>

It does not seem that comprehensive lists were compiled during this period indicating the names or even number of men that were discharged from each company and how successful the captains were in recruiting replacements. Testimony from a number of sources leads one to believe that they were less successful than had been anticipated. Colonel James Robertson, in a mid-September letter to William Preston, said that the lack of able men in Botetourt County had forced him to create a new company by taking five or six men from each of several companies

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<sup>2</sup>As quoted in Dixon and Hunter, Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg), Apr. 1, 1775, 2.

already in the field.<sup>3</sup> A more informative account of problems in recruiting was given by Charles Lewis after the campaign had begun. "I am sorry to tell your Excellency that from sickness and death I have not been able to bring but a little more than 300 men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on this important expedition. The men being so very sickly while they were in the service below gave the people of the counties that composed the Battalion such a distaste to the minute service, that very few new recruits could be raised by the officers: But the deficiency has been amply made up by the activity and good conduct of Colo. Christian in raising the men in the back counties."<sup>4</sup> Colonel William Christian also referred to this problem in a letter written to Governor Patrick Henry while the campaign was in progress. "Lieut. Colo. Russell who was much disappointed, especially in the County of Fincastle about getting the three hundred men ordered by the Convention, took into service a great part of the men in the Forts [Watauga and Holston]; that step, and that alone, prevented the people from starving or quitting the country altogether."<sup>5</sup>

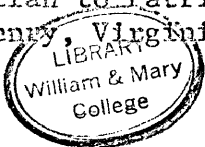
The strategic goals of the campaign were delineated in the Council's initial instructions to Colonel Christian. The expedition had been organized "for the purpose of severely chastising that

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<sup>3</sup>James Robertson to William Preston, Sept. 16, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 72.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Lewis to Patrick Henry, Oct. 6, 1776, Executive Papers of Patrick Henry, Virginia State Archives, Richmond.

<sup>5</sup>William Christian to Patrick Henry, Oct. 16, 1776, Executive Papers of Patrick Henry, Virginia State Archives, Richmond.



Cruel and Perfidious [Cherokee] Nation which you are to do in the manner most likely to put a stop to future Insults and Ravages and that may redound most to the honour of the American Arms." If he were successful in this undertaking he "must take care to demand and receive a sufficient number of their Chiefs and Warriors as Hostages for the Performance of the Conditions you may require of them. You must insist on their delivering up all Prisoners, who may chuse to leave them and on their giving up to justice all persons amongst them who have been concerned in bringing on the present war particularly Stewart, Cameron, and Gist, and all others who have committed Murders or Robberies on our Frontiers."<sup>6</sup>

As to the actual tactics of the campaign, Christian was allowed almost complete freedom to make his own plans. He described them in some detail to North Carolina General Rutherford, in the only extant letter I discovered which passed between the two prior to the actual campaign.<sup>7</sup> In this letter, written in mid-August, Christian said,

The Number of effective men allotted to be under my command are 1450 besides those from your province. They are now gathering with all possible dispatch and will begin to march in less than two weeks from the different counties in which they are to be raised. I have appointed the General Rendezvous to be held at the Big Island on Holston River on the 20th day of Sep. The Island is in the Enemy's Country and within 130 miles of the principal Overhill Towns.

I shall endeavour to march in a day or two after the Rendezvous and loose no time afterwards, but hurry on as quick as possible. I hope to take with me Fifty days provisions. The Flour I will haul in Waggon and

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<sup>6</sup>McIlwaine, Official Letters - Governors of Virginia, 21-22.

<sup>7</sup>Several others were written because Christian mentions them in this letter. However, I have been unable to find them.

will open a waggon road as I go. When I wrote on the 15th Instant to South Carolina I imagined it would be betwixt the 10th and the 15th day of October before I could be at the Towns. But now I concluded I may be there about the 5th, I have no doubt of marching ten miles each day. I know of nothing that can delay me except repeated skirmishes or Broad river its being high. I am now near the center of the County [Botetourt] which will furnish the provisions and men for the Expedition, therefore I shall wait here, if nothing new occurs, about ten days longer and then begin to move towards the place of Rendezvous, which is 190 miles from here, in order to be there eight or ten days beforehand.

Colonel Christian, commander of the impending expedition, was well qualified for such an undertaking by virtue of his long service on the frontier in both military and civil capacities. He was born in 1743 to Israel and Elizabeth Stark Christian, a couple from the Isle of Man who had emigrated first to Ireland and then to Augusta County in 1740.<sup>9</sup> Israel Christian became the proprietor of a general store in Staunton, and evidently was quite successful as a businessman and land speculator since he was able to give his son-in-law, William Fleming, a large estate in Botetourt County a quarter of a century later. Little is known of William Christian's early life and education, but he apparently began a military career at an early age, since in 1763 he was listed as a captain in Colonel William Byrd's regiment and had seen service on the frontier.<sup>10</sup>

In 1767 he entered the law office of Patrick Henry as a student,

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<sup>8</sup>William Christian to Brigadier General Rutherford, Botetourt County, Aug. 18, 1776, Executive Papers of Patrick Henry, Va., State Archives, Richmond.

<sup>9</sup>See Thomas Denton McCormick in DAB s.v. "Christian, William."

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

managing to find sufficient free time to woo and win the hand of Anne Henry, Patrick's favorite sister.<sup>11</sup> Christian returned to the frontier shortly thereafter, residing first in Botetourt and then Fincastle County. He represented Fincastle in the Virginia House of Burgesses in the 1773, 1774, and 1775 sessions, and both counties in the Senate in 1776 and again from 1780-1783.<sup>12</sup> He also served as a member of the Fincastle Committee of Safety in 1775 and was a delegate to the convention which met in Richmond on March 20 and July 17, 1775 to discuss and initiate proceedings for allying Virginia to the patriot cause and organizing its defensive system.<sup>13</sup>

He had remained an active participant in military ventures throughout the period, commanding a regiment of Fincastle militia during Dunmore's War. On February 13, 1776 he was commissioned a lieutenant colonel of the First Virginia Regiment, Continental Line, and was promoted to the rank of colonel on March 18.<sup>14</sup> In July he resigned this post to accept a commission as a colonel of the Virginia militia and appointment as commander of the expedition against the Cherokee by the Virginia Council of Defense (August 1, 1776).<sup>15</sup> Christian represented Virginia as a commissioner at the peace talks, which met on the Long Island on the Holston, July 20, 1777, with the Cherokee which resulted from his campaign. In August

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

1785 he moved to Kentucky with his family, settling near Louisville on a portion of the 9000 acre land grant he had received from Virginia as compensation for his military service. On April 9, 1786 he was killed there by a party of Wabash Indians.<sup>16</sup>

Some unforeseen delays obviously did occur in the preparations and execution of the expedition, as Christian and his men did not reach the Indian towns until about one week after the date he originally anticipated. Significant detachments intended for the expeditionary force had not even marched for the rendezvous point by September 20th, the date Christian had set for everyone to have arrived. The situation was described in a letter William Russell wrote to Colonel Preston on September 21. "I arrived here [Fort Chiswell, Fincastle County] yesterday evening with orders from Col. Christian to hurry down the remainder of the troops together with such waggons as have come this far. . . . I left the Island the 18th with only 300 officers and men. I met Colonel Williams [commander of the North Carolina detachment] and his battalion at 15 mile creek, the Botetourt companies and our waggons of stores about a mile and a half ahead of the Carolinians and Colo. Lewis is now here and will march tomorrow."<sup>17</sup> It is evident that Christian sent Russell from the rendezvous point back into Virginia to discover what the delay was, since, only two days before the appointed time for the rendezvous, less than one-sixth of the force had arrived. Christian himself did

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> William Russell to William Preston, Sept. 21, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 73.

not mention the cause of the delay in any of his subsequent reports to Governor Henry.

As to the actual events of the campaign once it was under way, the only reliable sources are Christian's three reports to Patrick Henry, and two additional letters written by members of the expedition, neither of which does more than confirm what Christian had said.<sup>18</sup>

The first of Christian's reports was written a short time after the campaign had gotten under way. He had ordered a fort, named Fort Patrick Henry, constructed on the Great Island in which he left a portion of the supplies and one hundred men on garrison duty. Few Indians had been encountered in the area immediately around the island, and the only action which he had to report was an occasional attempt by Indians to ambush a single soldier. He included a brief account of one such occurrence. "The Enemy generally fire from behind logs and bushes, and seldom at a greater distance than eight or ten steps; last Tuesday three of them fired upon two men and broke one of their arms but they got away. Nothing has been done since."<sup>19</sup>

The coordination between Christian's men and the North

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<sup>18</sup>J. C. Ramsey provided a somewhat more detailed account of the course taken by the expedition in his Annals of Tennessee (Charleston, 1853). He did not indicate the sources for the additional details he included, however, and it is possible he reconstructed the route on the basis of what he thought was feasible. I hesitate to use his work as a reference since, in other instances, he made glaring errors concerning the expedition. For example, he stated that several detachments for the expedition had reached the rendezvous point by August (p. 165)!

<sup>19</sup>William Christian to Patrick Henry, Oct. 6, 1776, Executive Papers of Patrick Henry, Va. State Archives, Richmond.

Carolinian forces under Brigadier Rutherford which had been hoped for did not materialize. Christian mentioned in the letter that he had not heard from Rutherford since a letter he received on August 27. The number of troops effectively under his command which he could rely on in the event of a major battle was approximately 2,000. The patriot government had mobilized 1,450 militia for the expedition, and a contingent of 300 troops from North Carolina had been sent to participate directly under Christian's command.<sup>20</sup> An additional number of men, the number never having been specified by Christian, were recruited from among the frontiersmen in the forts and blockhouses on the Watauga and Holston rivers.<sup>21</sup>

His immediate plans for the expedition reveal Christian as a commander supremely confident in his own ability and that of his men to meet any eventuality. "I shall march in less than an Hour and take with me 30 days flour and seventy days Beef. I hope to cross the [French] Broad river the 15th Instant where it is most likely I will be attacked or meet with proposals of peace. The men who have fled from the Towns say that the Indians will surely fight desperately; which they promised Stewart the King's Superintendent to do; and Cameron his deputy who remains amongst them is daily encouraging them to defend their country against a parcel of Rebels. I Heartily wish that they may attack me

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<sup>20</sup>McIlwaine, ed., Official Letters, 27.

<sup>21</sup>William Christian to Patrick Henry, Oct. 6, 1776, Executive Papers of Patrick Henry, Va. State Archives, Richmond.

first, and it is the wish of the Army."<sup>22</sup> He added further, "Cameron, being an artful man, may invent measures to delay our March if the Indians will execute them with dexterity, but I still have no doubt of returning to the Island in five weeks from this time, six at the furthest."<sup>23</sup>

The remainder of this report was a description of the extreme hardships suffered by and deplorable condition of the frontiersmen in the Watauga and Holston area. He visited several of the nearby forts, where about three thousand people had sought shelter, and ". . . found many in want of provisions, great numbers sick, and heard of many that had died, occasioned I supposed by their close confinement and being too much crowded together."<sup>24</sup> He ordered several wagonloads of flour to be distributed among these people, but took extreme pains so as not to appear to be disposing supplies without authorization. Christian assured Henry that he "gave orders to the Commissary to keep an account thereof, that the men may be called upon to pay for it, or such other steps taken therein as your Excellency and the Honorable Council shall please to direct. In all probability there will be more flour than I shall want for the expedition. It might prevent great distress if [you] would allow some of it to be sold to such of the Inhabitants as have lost their crops by the War."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 6, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 6, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 6, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 6, 1776, Ibid.

Christian's next report, written Oct. 14-15 on the banks of the French Broad river, indicated that the army had made good time on their march, encountering no delays worthy of mention. He did report that on the twelfth a white man bearing a truce flag had entered the militia camp. The man had been sent by the Cherokee Chief, the Raven, requesting a parley to determine if peace could be arranged on agreeable terms. Christian's reply was indicative again of the high confidence he had in his own ability to conduct a successful campaign. He reported that his answer was: "How can he [the Raven] send to me for peace before he has delivered up Cameron that enemy to white and red people. How can the Nation think of Asking peace of me when they retain our prisoners; How can they ask a peace when they have the assurance to assemble their men to Fight me, if they should dislike my terms. That I should cross the river and proceed to the Town, that mercy and Bravery was the Characteristick of the States of America; and that I should distinguish between those towns who had behaved well towards us, and others who had not done so."<sup>26</sup>

On the thirteenth Christian executed what in retrospect was the most hazardous movement of the entire campaign. He had reached the near bank of the French Broad in late afternoon and expected his crossing to be opposed by a large force of Cherokee. He sent out scouts to discover alternate fordings, one of which was discovered several miles below the camp. Having found this, he said, "Ten o'clock at night I set off with between ten and

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<sup>26</sup>William Christian to Patrick Henry, Oct. 14-15, 1776, Executive Papers of Patrick Henry, Va. State Archives, Richmond.

eleven hundred men, 200 of them mounted on horses and by One O'Clock in the morning got over with much danger and difficulty, the river being so Deep and rapid that none of the men could waid, the night was so very dark I was obliged frequently to make lights, the river about half a mile counting the several windings we were obliged to make."<sup>27</sup> Having successfully completed this movement, Christian marched his men to the area where the Indians were supposedly waiting in ambush, surrounded the site, and found nothing.

He received a report from some of his advance spies on the fourteenth that he could expect the Indians to resist his advance all the way to their towns and thereafter follow a "scorched-earth" policy to slow his movements. He accepted this report as accurate, saying that he believed the first peace proposal he received was the attitude of only the Raven Warrior of Chote and that it had been disapproved of by most of the rest. He did not rule out the possibility of further offers of peace, as he felt the Indians were disconcerted at the rapid progress of his force.

Christian received just such an offer the next day, which he reported in a second letter and enclosed it with the first. Captain Nathaniel Gist had entered camp the previous night under a flag of truce to intercede for the Raven warrior of Chote. Gist claimed that Christian's reply to the first peace proposal had caused the Raven's people and many others to retreat rapidly westward. No firm conclusion could be drawn from this information,

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<sup>27</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 14-15, 1776, Ibid.

however, because Cameron apparently was still trying to rally the Cherokee in defense of their land. Gist reported Cameron had advised "the Indians to burn their Towns and Corn; because they must then depend on him for ammunition to get meat and by that means to continue the War."<sup>28</sup> Gist's statements apparently had the desired effect on Christian because he concluded the letter by saying, "I believe I shall push first for the Island Town and those who bred the war, and have thought of Sparing Chote."<sup>29</sup> Naturally there were other reasons why Colonel Christian would follow a policy of leniency towards those Cherokee towns which had remained peaceful. An indiscriminate attack on all the towns would serve only to eliminate those groups which, if not friendly, had at least maintained their neutrality. There was little hope that the expeditionary force could overwhelmingly crush the Cherokee in battle because, as Preston had pointed out months before, if they did not wish to fight they could easily escape by way of the river. Christian undoubtedly knew this and shaped his policy accordingly.

Colonel Christian's final report while on the campaign was written at the Indian town which he had made his headquarters on October twenty-third. His passage of the Tennessee and subsequent march through several of the Indian towns was completely unopposed. The condition in which he found the towns is indicative of the extreme haste in which the people fled. "Some of them [Cherokees]

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<sup>28</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 14-15, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> William Christian to Patrick Henry, Oct. 23, 1776, the Executive Papers of Patrick Henry, Virginia State Archives, Richmond.

had shut their doors and some had not, they had carried off their cloaths and best of their household goods, but took little provisions. The greatest part of them I judge went off in canoes down the Tennessee. They left Horses, Cattle, Dogs, Hogs, and Fowls."<sup>30</sup> The effect of the reply Christian had given to the first peace envoy had been dramatic, and the man himself told Christian, " . . . every party he delivered my answer to turned about and ran home as quick as possible, that he rode fast from Broad river to the towns and that some of them kept up with him on foot. That the next day after all the people in the Towns picked up and fled, . . ." down the Tennessee and Highwassey Rivers.<sup>31</sup>

Christian sent out scouts to inform the Indians that he would now talk over peace terms with them since they had refused to fight. He continued by saying that he expected several of the important Cherokee chiefs to enter camp the next day to begin talks. Christian added, with a mixture of compassion and common sense, "I suppose that in three days after [the arrival of the chiefs] I can open a treaty, or begin to destroy the Town and pursue the Indians towards the Creeks. I know Sir that I could kill and take Hundreds of them and starve hundreds by destroying their corn, but it would be mostly the women and Children, as the men could retreat faster than I can follow. And I am convinced that the Virg. State would be better pleased to hear that I shewed

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<sup>30</sup>Christian to Henry, Oct. 23, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Christian to Henry, Oct. 23, 1776, Ibid.

pity to the distressed and spared the suppliants rather than I should commit one act of Barbarity in destroying a whole nation of Enemies."<sup>32</sup> He finished this part of his account by saying that the principal causes of the war he now believed to be Cameron and one of the Cherokee chiefs, Dragging Canoe. Speaking of the latter Christian said, "This Chief was the principal agent in hastening the War. I came through other Towns without touching anything in them and am now destroying his. I intend to destroy some others that was under his influence, whether I make peace or not, particularly a town in which a man was burnt, that was taken at Watauga."<sup>33</sup> After discussing some rumors he had heard regarding the possibility of a Shawnee attack on the frontier and accounting for some supplies of lead and powder which he had sent the frontier settlements, Christian concluded, "I expect to be in Botetourt by the 20th of November whether I treat or not. . . ."<sup>34</sup>

With the completion of this letter, the Christian expedition was at its end. He negotiated a temporary settlement with several Cherokee chieftains, the Raven Warrior among them, and then returned to Fort Patrick Henry late in November. Here the greatest portion of the expeditionary force was disbanded and the men returned to their homes. The final treaty with the Cherokee was negotiated in July of 1777, with William Christian serving as one of the Virginia commissioners, along with Colonel William Preston and Major Evan Shelby.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 23, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 23, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Christian to Henry, Oct. 24, 1776, Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Henry to William Christian, Hanover, Jan. 22, 1777, Draper Mss., 4QQ, 77.

## Conclusion

What are the conclusions which one might make reasonably after completing this study of the Virginia - North Carolina frontier in 1776 and of Colonel William Christian's expedition against the Overhill Cherokee? Some have been discussed at some length in the body of the essay, while others have received only passing mention. It is entirely possible, of course, that still others lie as yet unrecognized amidst the mass of source material.

Since the period studied lies entirely within the American Revolutionary War, the question which naturally is raised is how the outcome of the Christian expedition affected the relative positions of the two combatant powers, at least in relation to the southern frontier. First, and most apparent, the study demonstrated that the British Indian agents, left largely to their own devices, were unable to achieve effective control over their Indian allies in the South. The one goal which John Stuart explicitly stated as an immediate objective, that of restraining the Indians from making indiscriminate border attacks, was never realized. His concern for the welfare of frontier Loyalists, which led him to attempt to control the Indians initially, points to another goal, never explicit, but certainly implicit both in the logic of the frontier situation and in certain of the actions of the British agents.

This goal was the attempt to create what I have called a Loyalist state or refuge on the Southern frontier in Indian territory.

Certainly if this could have been accomplished the British cause would have benefitted greatly by it. The British could have conserved the Loyalist strength and sentiment that existed on the frontier by organizing British sympathizers into some sort of rudimentary colony, protected from patriot harassment and coercion by the Indian allies. By concentrating these groups in one area, the British could also facilitate the movement and dispersal of vitally needed supplies. Once such a base had been created it could have served both offensive and defensive purposes. If the Indians and Loyalists could achieve a significant degree of coordination of activities, offensive raids against patriot outposts were a possible course of action. If the refuge were intended to serve a primarily defensive purpose, as seems more likely, it would conserve Loyalist strength against the time when British strategic planners again looked to the South for a theater of military operations.

The massive reaction to the Cherokee Indian raids by the Virginia and North Carolina revolutionary governments ended the viability of the Loyalist refuge concept as a possible British objective. It is probable that the patriots themselves only dimly perceived this particular result of their operations. At the same time, however, they were well aware that the British could not be allowed uncontested influence among the Indian tribes on their frontiers. They reacted militarily in exactly the manner one would expect from a people long accustomed to frontier hostilities. Yet the actions of the leader of the expedition, William Christian, displayed an acute awareness of the larger issues at stake. He knew that it would be impossible to physically destroy the fighting

capability of the Cherokee and acted accordingly. His policy of leniency towards neutral or friendly Cherokee towns was calculated to win the allegiance of as many Indians as possible away from the British. This particular policy was continued in 1777 at the peace treaty concluded with the Cherokee.<sup>1</sup>

The expedition not only insured the loyalty of most frontiersmen, but also largely secured the frontier against Indian depredation for a number of years.<sup>2</sup> The frontiersmen showed themselves to be resourceful, energetic people, able to rise rapidly and cooperate with each other well in providing for their common defense. It is equally apparent, however, that they simply did not have the resources, human or material, to withstand any protracted series of attacks. They relied heavily on aid from the Virginia government when faced by a major crisis, and the Virginia government reacted with reasonable dispatch in responding to the frontiersmen's pleas for assistance.

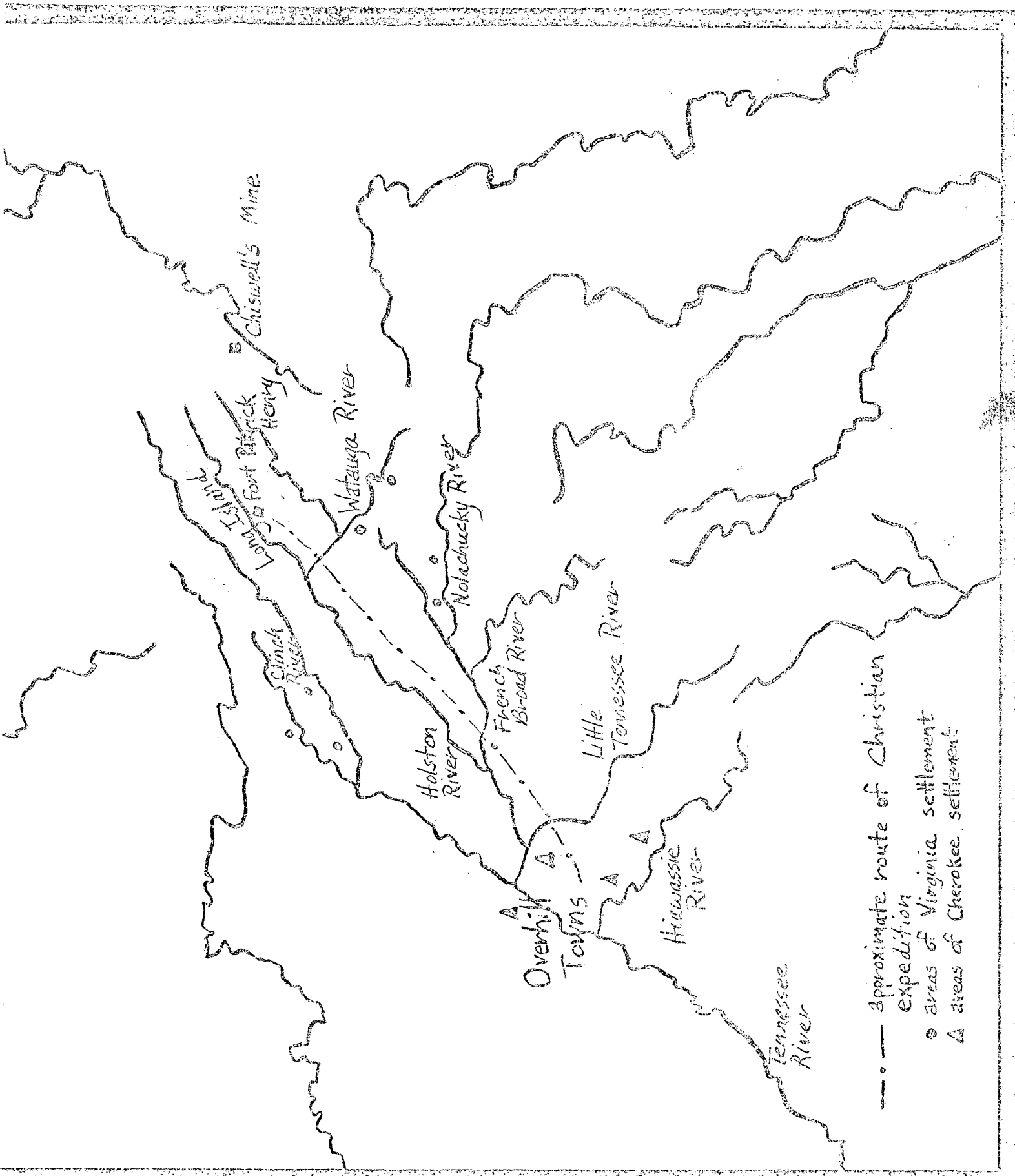
The position occupied by such men as William Preston and the others in eastern Fincastle County was central, both literally and figuratively. The energy with which he responded to the demands of the situation was boundless. Preston served as the communications hub of the period, transmitting messages to and from the seat of

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<sup>1</sup>See Patrick Henry's instructions to the Virginia commissioners. The patriots adopted British policies such as providing their allies with supplies.

<sup>2</sup>See Jack M. Sosin, The Revolutionary Frontier 1763-1783 (New York, 1967), 91. One group of Cherokee, under Dragging Canoe, refused to sign the peace treaty and retreated deep into Tennessee. There they were known as Chickamaugas and, besides harboring some Loyalist refugees, carried out sporadic, largely ineffective, raids against the Virginians.

revolutionary government in Williamsburg. It was largely through his efforts that the government was made aware of the dangers on the frontier, and, after the expedition was planned, he arranged for the purchase of many of the supplies so vital to its success.



Map adapted from Jack Sosin, *The Revolutionary Frontier*, 67

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