

Harmon Cox Mill Site: David Fanning's Headquarters

Submitted by: Warren Dixon

- Location: Highway 22 South of Ramseur at Millstone Creek
- Owners: Bill and Emily Cox Johnson, 2648 NC 22 S., Ramseur NC 27316
- Private Property, No Public Access

The Harmon Cox Mill site deserves Cultural Heritage Site recognition not only because it served as headquarters for notorious Tory Colonel David Fanning, but because it has long been recognized as one of the county's Revolutionary landmarks. For these reasons, it could easily be considered as a Randolph County Historic Landmark also, if the property owners so desire to nominate it.

When William Cox, who owned the mill across Deep River on Mill Creek (see the Raymond Cox Mill) willed his mill to his son Thomas in 1767, he left the land on the opposite side of the river on Millstone Creek, to his son Harmon. It was Harmon's mill on the east side of Deep River that became the center of community action, for good or ill.

The following narrative, written by Mac Whatley, illustrates the importance of the Harmon Cox Mill site to Randolph County and North Carolina:

Harmon Cox (1723-1817) was something of the family black sheep and became heavily involved with the Regulator movement, signing their letters and public announcements and hosting large public meetings as early as 1768. By April, 1769, he had been disowned by his Friends meeting for his un-Quaker-ly actions. After the Battle of Alamance Governor Tryon specifically ordered state troops to "to Herman Cox's on Deep River, to make a requisition of provisions from the inhabitants on the south side of Deep River and Richland Creek" and "to apprehend any of the Outlaws that may be Sculking in the Neighbourhood..."

When the Revolution came, Cox's Mill was apparently designated or considered a "public store" in much the same way as Bell's Mill, since the mill itself was protected from destruction by both sides. When food and forage for the Continental Army ran low in Chatham County, Cox's Mill became its destination and headquarters, with provisions sufficient to keep the forces supplied for more than a month. As the various state militias and county troops followed the Continentals toward Camden, Cox's Mill remained the staging area for United States forces to join the fight. It may have been at this time that the troops fortified the mill area, creating what guerilla leader David Fanning later called "the Fort of Deep River at Cox's Mill."

As local Whig authority collapsed in the aftermath of the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, and the loyalist militias gained control of the area, Cox's Mill must have looked like the perfect headquarters for Fanning, the de facto warlord of Randolph and Chatham counties for more than a year. A number of battles were fought for possession and control of the mill, which changed hands at least four times as Fanning vanished into the countryside when out-numbered or endangered. The Battle of Brush Creek either started or ended at Cox's Mill, as the Whig and Tory forces fought along the connecting road to Lindley's Mill for more than a day. But Whig forces retaliated in December, 1781, forcing the Tories into the woods with a state militia force which "came down from the mountains," Fanning wrote in his Narrative, "with a party of Three Hundred men; and formed his camp at Coxe's Mill, in the settlement I had formerly ranged in; in order to take me; where he continued nearly three months..." When Fanning sought to negotiate at truce in January 1782, a Whig officer offered "a parole on the terms you desired; thirty miles east and west; fifteen miles north and south. Hammond [Harmon] Coxe's mill to be the center of your bounds..."

With Fanning's departure in the summer of 1782, Cox's Mill was never again the center of death and destruction, but it remained an important industrial center. Nothing visible remains of the Revolutionary fortifications on the bluffs above the mill site, but the foundations of the mill and saw mill are visible, as are the foundations of later bridges, whether covered, steel or culvert varieties.