The Conscience of Captain Clark

By Ross A. Holt

William Clark (1753-1836) was a leading Patriot in Randolph County during the Revolutionary War. Historian Joseph Addison Blair, writing in 1890, called him "one of the most daring and determined spirits of that day," and "the acknowledged leader of the Whig Party in Randolph."[1] Blair said that to Clark, "the post of danger had a fascination which he loved and sought." After the war, however, Clark wrestled with his conscience over some of the actions he had taken.

Of Scotch-Irish extraction, Clark was born in Pennsylvania. His family was established in Rowan County, North Carolina, by 1762, when his father, Samuel (1724-1783), received a Granville land grant of 613 acres on the west side of Deep River.[2] This area was located in the eastern portion of Rowan County, which in 1771 would be combined with the western section of Orange County to form Guilford County. The southern section of Guilford County, in turn, would become Randolph County in 1779. The tract was located along Muddy Creek and would neighbor the mill of William Bell, Randolph County's first sheriff. After the battle of Guilford Courthouse, Clark's plantation served as the headquarters of Gen. Charles, Lord Cornwallis, while British Army encamped around Bell's Mill.

Samuel was a "zealous Presbyterian and able to own a number of slaves…," wrote family historian William P. Clark, the great-grandson of Capt. William Clark, in a family history in 1916.[3] Samuel established a Presbyterian congregation – possibly the first in Randolph County – in a log building on his plantation. "As far as can be ascertained he gave his children such education, both secular and religious, as the country afforded. Some of his contemporaries bare [*sic*] witness to the fact that some of his sons took an active part in the work of the local church," William P. Clark says. A neighbor of the Clarks, Isaac Farlow, reports that William "acted as clerk in that [Presbyterian] church at Union 3 miles from Bells Mill, and would shed tears in giving out hymns…."[4] As Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, William P. Clark states, the Clarks' "love of freedom naturally made them Whigs." In 1778, William Clark married Eleanor Dougan (1759-1839), the sister of another important Randolph County Patriot, Col. Thomas Dougan.

William and his brothers joined the Patriot cause. George Clark (1749-?) served four hitches in the militia from 1776 to about 1780.[5] During his service he rounded up Tories, fought in Gen. Griffin Rutherford's campaign against the British-allied Cherokee and participated in other marches. Notably, before Randolph County was carved out of Southern Guilford County, he served in companies commanded by William Bell and John Collier, who would become

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[1] J.A. Blair, *Reminiscences of Randolph County* (Greensboro, N.C.: Reece & Elam, Book and Job Printers, 1890), 21.

[2] North Carolina Land Patent Book 6/126 (https://nclandgrants.com/grant/?mars=12.14.107.121&qid=1188961&rn=8).

[3] William P. Clark, *The Clarks of Randolph* (Middleton, DE: Ulan Press [reprint], 2025), 1. This is a facsimile of a typescript created by the author in Paonia, Colorado, in 1916.

[4] "Isaac Farlow's Statement of Revolutionary Events," in Jennifer M. Wellborn, *Martha McFarlane McGee Bell: Heroine, Patriot, and Spy, and the Case for Carruthers* (Rock Hill, S.C.: Jennifer M. Welborn, 2002), 178. Union appears to correspond with the present-day Old Union Church, which was established as a Methodist church in 1786 at Bell's Meeting House, a log building shared at the time by multiple denominations. See "Brief History," *Old Union Church, Sophia, NC* (https://www.oldunionumc.org/history/).

[5] Pension Application of George Clark, S 3157, *Southern Campaign American Revolution Pension Statements & Rosters* (https://revwarapps.org/s3157.pdf).

leading figures in Randolph County after its creation. Joseph Clark (?-1793) and John Clark (1759-1817) served as captains in the Randolph County militia, Joseph serving in a light horse unit.[6] Thomas Clark (?-?) served in the Guilford County militia.[7] William P. Clark reports that most of the brothers' service took place in South Carolina.

William served in 1777 and later as a captain with the Randolph County militia from 1779-1782. William P. Clark details Clark's service in the family history, combining family lore with the account of Clark's exploits reported in the Rev. Eli Carruthers' *Revolutionary Incidents*.[8] Carruthers' primary source was a written testament by Isaac Farlow.[9] A pension application filed by Clark's son John in 1845 includes a testimonial from Gen. Alexander Gray, a prominent citizen of northwestern Randolph County.[10] Gray talked extensively with former Patriot leaders, including Clark, whom he met in 1792, about their experiences during the war. Each of these sources includes details that the others do not. The four accounts taken together offer a more complete record of Clark's service, and to a degree fact-check each other.

Beginning in late 1780, much of Clark's activity would have consisted of confronting the Tories, who had become militarized in Randolph and Chatham counties following the arrival of Col. David Fanning. In support of the anticipated British incursion into North Carolina, Fanning established a headquarters in southeastern Randolph County and rallied Tories in the area to his cause. Clark would have participated in small skirmishes, often fruitless expeditions in pursuit of Fanning, the arrest and parole (or possibly hanging) of Tory sympathizers, and defense of Patriot-controlled areas or the homes of Patriot leaders.

As the regular forces maneuvered, however, North Carolina militia companies were summoned for service with the Continental Army. William P. Clark states that so many North Carolina militia were sent to the defense of Charleston in 1780, it is likely Clark fought there, and escaped or was exchanged after the Continental Army surrendered. He also reports that Clark initially served under Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, who commanded the American forces at Charleston.

Testimony in pension application places Clark at "the battle of Campden" – which could have been the 1780 American defeat or the 1781 battle of Hobkirk's Hill, or both. By the logic of Randolph County militia participation, Clark might have served at 1780 the battle, where three

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[6] Clark, 2.

[7] Thomas Clark of Randolph County is occasionally confused in family histories and other records with a Thomas Clark (1741-1792) from the Wilmington area, who served in and commanded North Carolina regiments in the Continental Army. An occasionally observed assertion that William Clark served under his brother Thomas in the Continental Army appears to be incorrect. See Shaw, 13; "Capt. Thomas Clark," *The American Revolution in North Carolina* (https://www.carolana.com/NC/Revolution/patriots_nc_capt_thomas_clark_guilford.html); and "Clark, Thomas," *NCpedia* (https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/clark-thomas).

[8] Rev. E.W. Carruthers, *Revolutionary Incidents: Sketches of Character, Chiefly in the Old North State* (Wilmington, N.C.: Dram Tree Books, 2010 [reprint], 199-203.

[9] Welborn, 178.

[10] Pension Application of William Clarke (Clark), R1968, *Southern Campaigns American Revolution Pension Statements and Rosters* (https://revwarapps.org/r1968.pdf). For a period of time, Gray was the county's largest landowner and owner of the largest number of enslaved people, although he supported gradual emancipation. He was a general of North Carolina militia in the War of 1812, but the militia did not see combat.

Randolph companies were part of the 2nd Orange County Regiment commanded by Randolph County's Col. John Collier and Maj. James Dougan.[11]

William P. Clark also reports that Clark fought in the battle of Cowpens, but missed the battle of Guilford Courthouse as a result of being assigned to scouting duty with his Randolph County unit.[12] At Cowpens, at least one Randolph County company, under Capt. William Gray, marched with the North Carolina Militia Brigade under Col. Charles McDowell.[13] Small contingents of North Carolina state troops and light horse also could have included Randolph County men. McDowell's troops comprised a line of skirmishers in advance of the main American lines, and fell back on the American right flank as the battle progressed. After the battle of Guilford Courthouse, according to William P. Clark, Clark likely rode with the army in pursuit of Cornwallis and then into South Carolina. If this is the case, he might have participated in the 1781 battle of Hobkirk's Hill – which also could be considered a "battle of Campden," given its proximity to the site of the 1780 engagement.

Clark also fought in the last major battle in the south at Eutaw Springs, about 60 miles northeast of Charleston, on September 8, 1781. General Nathanael Greene and the Continental Army, though losing the battles at Hobkirk's Hill and Ninety Six, had rendered British positions in the South Carolina back country untenable. Greene continued to press toward Charleston, and on September 8, 1781, attacked the British under Col. Alexander Stewart at Eutaw Springs. Greene deployed the North and South Carolina militia in his front line, intending them to thin the British ranks before turning the fight over to his veteran Continental regiments. Front and center were some 150 North Carolinians under Col. Francis de Malmedy, including a Randolph County contingent commanded by Col. Thomas Dougan, in which Clark was serving. The North Carolina militia was flanked by South Carolina militia under Gen. Andrew Pickens on their left, and by the Swamp Fox, Col. France Marion, and his men on their right.

The militia advanced to the attack, but reports indicate that while the South Carolina troops on either side forged ahead, the North Carolinians faltered after about three volleys and fell back to be replaced by the Continentals. Greene's force drove the British back, but the redcoats rallied around a fortified house and stockaded garden, and halted the American advance. Greene was forced to withdraw, expecting to resume the fight on the next day. But rain intervened, and the British held the field. Greene technically lost the battle, but once again the British found themselves overextended and under continued threat, and eventually withdrew to the confines of Charleston for the remainder of the war.

After Eutaw Springs, the Randolph County militia returned home. Either on the road or later in September, Thomas Dougan was captured by Loyalist militia. Col. David Fanning wanted to hang Dougan on the spot, but Dougan was well-respected and Fanning's officers rose to his defense. Dougan was transferred to Wilmington as a prisoner of war. There, the commander of the British garrison, Maj. James Craig, also determined to hang Dougan, but a Loyalist commander associated with the Yadkin River region, Col. William Elrod, argued

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[11] See "The Battle of Camden," *The American Revolution in South Carolina* (https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/revolution_battle_of_camden.html). Randolph County was in the Hillsborough Militia District; Hillsborough was the county seat of Orange County.

[12] This would explain the absence of significant numbers of Randolph County militia at Guilford Courthouse. Lawrence Babits, in *Long, Obstinate and Bloody: The Battle of Guilford Courthouse* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), found that a combined unit of about 75 militia from Randolph, Chatham and Rockingham counties served with the North Carolina militia in the American first line.

[13] "Cowpens," *The American Revolution in South Carolina* (https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/revolution_battle_of_cowpens.html)

Dougan's case.[14] Dougan was imprisoned, but walked away from captivity when the British abandoned Wilmington in November.

Four months later, Clark, Dougan and Elrod would have a fateful encounter. Elrod, who lived at the Forks of the Yadkin in the southeastern corner of present-day Davie County, was a leader of some reputation, although he did not have the notoriety of Fanning. He was active in the Yadkin River valley, and joined Fanning on expeditions into the southeastern part of the state. Multiple pension accounts of men serving in Patriot Col. Elijah Isaacs' militia expedition to Randolph and Chatham counties in December 1781 report that Isaacs was marching against both Fanning and Elrod. In June 1781, Elrod challenged Fanning's command of the militia, leading to a vote of the men which Fanning won, and a petition to Maj. Craig in Wilmington to offer Fanning a commission in the British Army.[15] On July 5, Craig commissioned Fanning as Colonel of the Loyal Militia in Randolph and Chatham counties.

In March 1782, Elrod was traveling home to the Yadkin with two of his men, Samuel Still and Michael Robbins. Accounts say he had been visiting Maj. Craig in Wilmington, but Craig and his garrison had evacuated the city in November. Elrod appears, however, to have spent time in Fanning's camp before traveling through Randolph County. Elrod's path home took him through the northwestern part of the county, where he encountered two local men, Henry Johnson and Robert Tucker. Johnson is believed to have been married to one of Clark's aunts, and widowed. Johnson, a Patriot who had previously been captured and paroled, was carrying a gun. Elrod accused him of violating his parole. Johnson said he simply used the gun to hunt. Elrod, Still and Robbins stood him against a tree and shot him to death. Tucker escaped and raised the alarm.

Dougan, Clark, William Bell and other Patriots raised a force to pursue Elrod, Still and Robbins. They reached the log house of Elrod's mother at Falls of the Yadkin. After surveilling the house and observing two men sleeping inside by the light of a fire in the fireplace, Clark burst through the door (William P. Clark says he broke the door with his body; Carruthers says he used a fence rail). In the cabin were two of the three Tories – Robbins, realizing what was coming, had separated from his companions with plans to depart from the region. Elrod and Still were captured. Farlow says Still initially denied their identities, but Clark beat Still's head against the hearth until Still admitted their names. The Patriots conducted a drumhead court martial and sentenced Elrod and Still to die the next morning. Dougan is said to have argued eloquently for sparing Elrod, as Elrod argued for him at Wilmington, but to no avail. At dawn, Elrod and Still were tied to trees and shot. William P. Clark states that Clark could not bear to watch the executions, and turned away. Elrod and Still were left where they fell.

While Clark, Dougan and the others were away pursuing Elrod, Fanning launched his "small scourge" of Patriot leaders, a surprise attack into the Patriot sanctuaries of western Randolph County. Fanning and his men found Lt. Col. Andrew Balfour and Capt. John Bryant at their homes, and killed them. They burned the homes of other Patriots, including Dougan's and Clark's. William P. Clark reports that one of Clark's daughters died of exposure as the family hid in the woods after the destruction of their home. He and Carruthers observe that Elrod's killing of Johnson drew what was essentially Randolph County's rapid reaction force out of the county, clearing the way for Fanning's raid. They conclude that Fanning likely would have become aware of the absence of a significant portion of the Patriot militia, and it may have influenced the

[14] Elrod is identified in some accounts as John Elrod. Carruthers says he was a major, not a colonel.

[15] David Fanning, *The Narrative of Col. David Fanning* (New York: Joseph Sabin, 1865), 17-18. Fanning refers to Elrod as "William Elwood."

timing his action. A Johnson family historian, Jessie Owen Shaw, goes so far as to state that Johnson's killing was "planned as a decoy" to lure away the Randolph militia in preparation for Fanning's raid.[16] In response to the attack, Capt. John Clark, William's brother, raised a handful of men, and Capt. Daniel Gillespie of the Guilford militia brought his company. The force pursued Fanning to no avail.

Clark's turning away from the executions of Elrod and Still suggests a measure of discomfit with the actions he was undertaking in the brutal partisan war. It was an earlier incident at the battle of Eutaw Springs, however, that changed him. As the armies prepared for battle, Clark observed a British officer dressing his unit's ranks. Clark borrowed a rifle or musket from one of his men, and shot the officer down. Because the armies were not yet engaged in combat, Clark came to view the act as murder and regretted it the rest of his days.[17] Gray states the incident was one that Clark "seldom could speak of without shedding tears."

William P. Clark speculates that in the immediate aftermath of the war, Clark "rebuilt his home near a spring that bears his name in the southwest part of what is now Randleman, and engaged in farming." But he wrestled with his conscience, not only in regard to the war but also in regard to the institution of slavery. Carruthers says that Clark, already a devout man, weighed his actions against scripture, and the practice of slavery against both scripture and the concepts articulated in the Declaration of Independence, and experienced an awakening.

"Having become settled in his conviction that both slavery and war are wrong," writes William P. Clark, "he pursued the only course that was open to him by joining the only church that stood uncompromisingly opposed to both." Clark became a Quaker. By 1800, he was a member of Center Monthly Meeting, just north of the Guilford County line. In 1802, he bought property on Caraway Creek, and moved to the Back Creek Monthly Meeting. In 1818, he joined the nearby Marlboro Monthly Meeting.

Clark sold his Caraway property in 1824 and returned to the present-day Randleman area. In 1833, he began living with his son John. When Clark's children urged him to seek a pension for his Revolutionary War service, he declared, according to Gray, that "he would not receive pay for acts which his conscience condemn." Blair says that Clark "laid aside his sword and scalping knife and became a devoted follower of the Prince of Peace."[18]

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[16] Jessie Owen Shaw, *The Johnsons and their Kin of Randolph* (Washington, D.C.: Jessie Owen Shaw, 1955, reprinted by Higginson Book Company, LLC, Salem, Mass.), 9.

[17] Pension Application of William Clark.

[18] Blair. A scalping knife was a large butcher-style knife used in the fur trade; the term does not necessarily imply the practice of scalping a person.