

GENERAL WILLIAM DAVIDSON

General William Davidson was the youngest son of George Davidson, and born in 1746. His father moved from Lancaster county, in Pennsylvania, in 1750, to North Carolina, and settled in the western part of Rowan county (now Iredell.) Here General Davidson received his earliest mental training, and subsequently his principal and final education at Queen's Museum College in Charlotte, where many of the patriots of Mecklenburg and surrounding counties were educated.

At the Provincial Congress which met at Halifax, on the 4th of April, 1776, four additional regiments to the two already in service, were ordered to be raised, over one of which (the 4th) Thomas Polk was appointed Colonel, James Thackston Lieutenant Colonel, and William Davidson Major. With this regiment, under General Francis Nash, he marched to join the army of the North, under General Washington, where he served until November 1779, when the North Carolina line was ordered south to reinforce General Lincoln, at Charleston. Previous to this time he had been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the line. As the troops passed through North Carolina, Colonel Davidson obtained a furlough for a few days to visit his family, whom he had not seen for three years. This saved him from the fate which befell Gen. Lincoln and his army at Charleston; for, when he approached that city, he found it so closely invested by the British Army that he was prevented from joining his regiment.

When Lincoln surrendered, Davidson returned to Mecklenburg, and rendered important services in subduing the Tories, who, encouraged by the success of the British arms, became numerous, daring and oppressive.

A strong force of Tories having assembled at Coulson's Mill, General Davidson raised a troop of volunteers and marched against them. A fierce skirmish took place, in which he was severely wounded by a ball passing through his body near the kidneys. This wound nearly proved fatal, and detained him from the service about two months. After his recovery, he again took the field, having been promoted for his bravery to the rank of Brigadier-General in the place of General Rutherford, made a prisoner at the battle of Camden. He was active, with General Sumner and Colonel Davie, in checking the advance of the British, and throughout this darkest period of the Revolution gave ample evidence of his untiring zeal in the cause of his country.

After the battle of the Cowpens, on the 17th of January, 1781, in which General Morgan, with an inferior force, chastised the temerity and insolence of Tarleton, General Davidson was actively engaged in assembling the militia of his district to aid General Greene in impeding the advance of the British army in pursuit of General Morgan, encumbered with more than five hundred prisoners, on his way to Virginia. General Greene, accompanied by two or three attendants, left his camp near the Cheraws, rode rapidly through the country, and met General Morgan at Sherrill's Ford, on the eastern bank of the Catawba river, and directed his future movements.

General Davidson had placed guards at Tuckasege, Toole's, Cowan's and Beattie's Fords. When Cornwallis approached the Catawba, on the evening of the 28th of January, he found it considerably swollen and impassable for his infantry.

This Providential obstacle caused him to fall back five miles from the river to Jacob Forney's plantation, a thrifty farmer of that neighborhood. General Davidson had assembled a force of about three hundred and fifty men at Cowan's Ford. At half past two o'clock on the morning of the 1st of February, 1781, Cornwallis broke up his encampment at Forney's and reached Cowan's Ford at daybreak. It was a dark morning, accompanied with slight drizzling rain. The light infantry, under Colonel Hall, entered first, followed by the grenadiers and the battalions.

The picquet of the Americans challenged the enemy; receiving no reply, the guard fired at the advancing enemy. This immediately called into action that portion of Davidson's forces placed near the river, who kept up a galling fire from the bank. According to Stedman, the English historian, who accompanied Cornwallis, the Tory guide, becoming alarmed at the firing, when the British army reached the middle of the river, turned about and left them. This caused Colonel Hall to lead them directly across to an unexpected landing-place. Colonel Hall was killed as he ascended the bank; the horse of Lord Cornwallis was shot in the river, and fell dead as he reached the bank; three privates were killed and thirty-six wounded. The diversion of the British army from the proper landing caused the Americans to fire angularly and not directly upon their enemy, and hence was less effective in its results. General Davidson, who was about half a mile in the rear with the larger portion of his forces, arrived at the scene of action just as the Americans were fleeing before the fire of the well-organized and greatly superior British forces.

In attempting to rally the Americans, and venturing too near the British army, he received a fatal shot in his breast, and fell dead almost instantly from his horse. The loss of the Americans in privates was only two killed and about twenty wounded.

The British infantry waded the river in platoons, and reserved their fire until they ascended the eastern bank, and thus effected their passage. Cornwallis remained only about three hours after the skirmish, for the purpose of burying his dead, and then proceeded in the direction of Salisbury. Soon after his departure David Wilson and Richard Barry, both of whom were in the skirmish, secured the body of their beloved commander, conveyed it to the house of Samuel Wilson, Sen., and buried it that night by torch-light in the graveyard of Hopewell Church.

Thus fell in the prime of life, and at a moment of great usefulness to his country, this noble and patriotic soldier. Right worthily is his name bestowed upon one of the most fertile counties of our State, and upon a seat of learning, located near the scene of his death, which will perpetuate his fame as long as liberty has a votary throughout all succeeding time.

Source: Sketches of Western North Carolina, Historical and Biographical
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