

“we shall be involved in a civil war in spite of our teeth”

Recruiting Backcountry Settlers to the Patriot Cause, 1775

Reports to the South Carolina Council of Safety, August-September 1775

To many backcountry settlers of the southern colonies, the Patriot-Loyalist conflict was somebody else’s problem. While those of wealth and British heritage nurtured Loyalism, most wanted no involvement with the political fights of the coastal and New England elites (as they viewed the rebellious uproar). In addition, many settlers did not share the cultural heritage of the Patriot leaders—they were of German, Scottish or Scots-Irish heritage, not English, and they were “dissenters,” i.e., members of non-Anglican Protestant denominations. Most significantly,

they valued their isolation in the western hills and would fight to protect *their* liberty as independent frontiersmen. But as war became imminent, decisions were forced upon them. Pressured from both sides—by the wealthy Loyalists in their midst and the coastal Patriots who arrived to recruit them—many backcountry men proved stubbornly resistant to recruiting, sermonizing, and outright fearmongering, as we see in the reports of determined but frustrated Patriot recruiters in the South Carolina backcountry.

In the summer of 1775, the Patriot committee of South Carolina, the “council of safety,” sent a team into the backcountry to recruit men into Patriot militias. The five men included William Henry Drayton, a wealthy rice planter and recent Loyalist-turned-Patriot, and two clergymen, William Tennent and Oliver Hart. Drayton and Tennent sent regular reports to the Council of Safety, reporting their occasional successes and numerous setbacks. How do they argue for the Patriot cause? How do they refute the Loyalist stance? What successes do they recount, and what obstacles prove most challenging?

■ 7 August 1775. Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Drayton & Tennent. Congaree Store, Orangeburg County, S.C.

GENTLEMEN: — Having left Charles Town on Wednesday morning, we arrived here early on Saturday afternoon, 130 miles distant from town. . .

As a first step to the particular object of our progress,¹ upon our arrival here we despatched notices to particular persons of influence among the Dutch² to endeavor to procure [arrange] a meeting of them . . .

To our great mortification not one German appeared, but one or two of our friends who had been industrious to procure a meeting. By them we were informed their countrymen were so much averse to take up arms, as they imagined, against the king, lest they should lose their lands; and were so possessed with an idea that the rangers were posted here to force their signatures to the association³ that they would not by any arguments be induced to come near us. Add to this that a report [rumor] had run among them that we had brought up orders to let the rangers loose upon them to destroy their properties. However unfavorable these circumstances are, we hope you will not be alarmed at them. We yet have some hopes of success, though we confess they are but small in this quarter [region]. . .

***so much averse to take up arms
. . . against the king, lest they
should lose their lands***

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¹ “particular object of our progress”: specific goal of our assignment/project.

² I.e., Germans. Many German settlers migrated to the Carolinas in the 1700s directly from Germany and also from Pennsylvania along the Great Wagon Road. The “Dutch” refers to the Dutch subset of German settlers as well as the common reference to the “Pennsylvania Dutch [German]” as the “Pennsylvania Dutch.”

³ Association: South Carolina declaration of support for the Patriot cause; see A Circular Letter, p. 2. All citizens were required to sign the association.

A CIRCULAR LETTER

TO THE COMMITTEES IN THE SEVERAL
DISTRICTS AND PARISHES OF SOUTH
CAROLINA

CHARLES TOWN, June 30, 1775

FELLOW-CITIZENS: — This year will be a grand epoch in the history of mankind. In this conspicuous and ever memorable year, America has been abused and Britain has disgraced herself in an unexampled manner. All the guilt of all the English Ministers of State, from the reign of the First William to the conclusion of the late war [French and Indian War] does not equal the guilt that British Ministers [cabinet officials] have incurred since the latter period. The measure of their iniquity appears now full. They seem fixed in the pursuit of their plan to enslave America in order that they might enslave Great Britain—to elevate the Monarch that has been placed on a Throne only to govern under the law into a Throne above all law. But Divine Providence has inspired the Americans with such virtue, courage, and conduct as has already attracted the attention of the universe and will make them famous to the latest posterity. The Americans promise to arrest the hand of tyranny and save even Britannia from shackles.

In a former letter, we declared to you that there was “but little probability of deciding the present unhappy public disputes by the pacific measures we have hitherto pursued.” Our ideas were just, and with the deepest grief yet firmest resolution we now announce to you that the sword of civil war is not only actually drawn, but stained with blood! The King’s troops have at length commenced hostilities against this continent, and not confining their ungenerous attacks against men in arms defending their properties, they have slaughtered the unarmed—the sick—the helpless—having long indiscriminately oppressed, they have now massacred our fellow-subjects in Massachusetts Bay. Mark the event. . . . [The Battle of Lexington and Concord is recounted in detail.]

As a first step for our defense, it was thought expedient to unite the inhabitants of the colony “as a band in her defense against every foe,” and to this purpose, on the fourth day of June, immediately after the celebration of Divine service in Congress, an association was signed by all the Members present, solemnly engaging their lives and fortunes. In the space of four days, the association was voluntarily subscribed by almost every inhabitant in Charles Town, and transmitted into the country [colony].

Yesterday Mr. Tennent performed divine service in camp, and in the afternoon Mr. Drayton harangued the Rangers⁴ respecting [about] the new and extraordinary power by which they were raised [organized], the nature of the public disputes [with Britain], and the justice of the cause in which they were engaged, the nature of their allegiance to the King and their duty to their country, their families and themselves, [and] their duty and obligation to oppose and attack any British troops landing in this colony. Their honor was awakened by contrasting their personal value and importance against the importance of the British troops. Their complaints respecting provisions were entered into [answered], and they were assured the public meant to do all that could be done for them consistently with the nature of discipline and the calamitous situation of affairs. . . They had grumbled about [lack of] tents, and were now informed that the British troops in America during the last war not only generally used but preferred huts made of bushes. Finally, encomiums [praise] were passed upon the progress they had made in the art military, and it was recommended to them in the strongest terms to pay the most perfect obedience to their officers, as the only means by which they could become good soldiers, and to defend those liberties and rights which they appeared so willing to protect. Hitherto there has been but little subordination. . . .

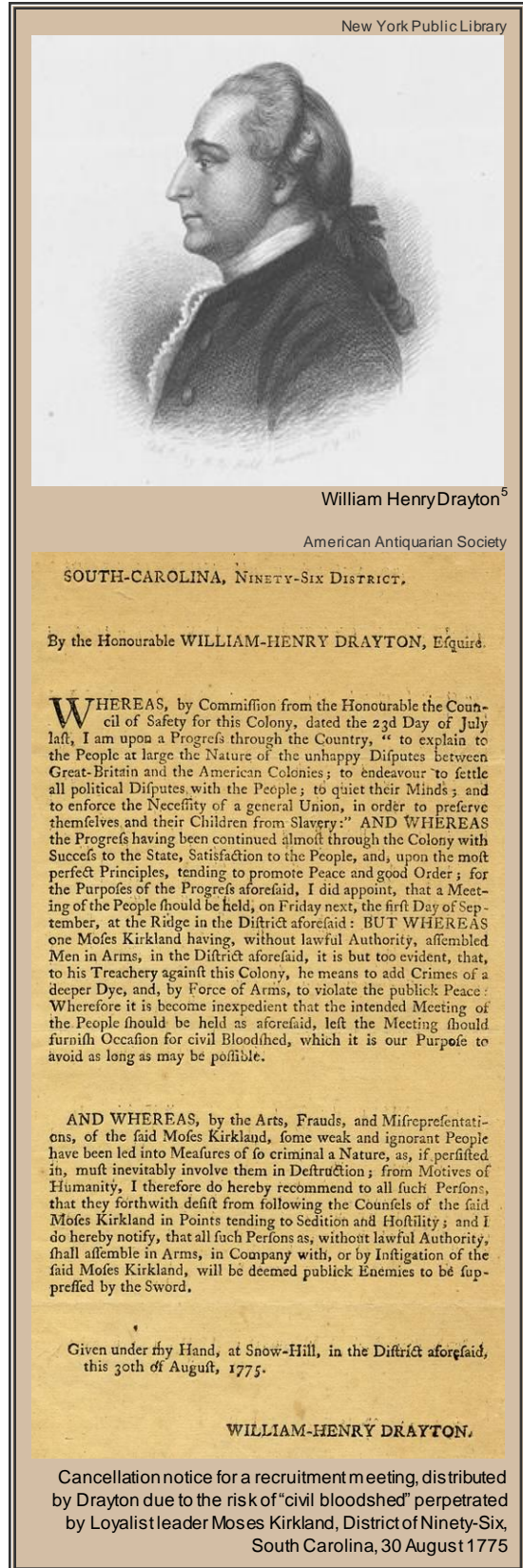
These things being finished, we left the camp in apparent quiet satisfaction and content, the men on being discharged expressing their thanks to us. But about midnight, an officer stole from the camp (about two miles off) and gave us the most alarming intelligence that a most dangerous mutiny had broke out in and prevailed throughout the whole camp, in which there was no longer any command or obedience; that the men were in an uproar at the idea of a deduction of their pay for they had in general been promised provisions above their pay, and they were determined to quit the camp this morning and disband. Col. Thomson and Capt. Kershaw lodged with us. They were willing to do anything that was thought proper. We consulted with them upon the case, and it was thought most advisable not to take any step in the night, or for either of those officers to go to the camp, but that time should be allowed for the men to cool; and for the three Captains and other officers in camp to sound the men and learn who would be depended upon. This measure had the effect we expected, and this morning the men appeared quiet, and it became evident that the disorders arose from three or four privates [low-rank soldiers] of profligate dispositions, and from improper conduct, declarations, and conversations of some officers. Capt. Woodward had incautiously [when] enlisting his men made promises which proved grounds of

⁴ Rangers: soldiers for the defense of the backcountry frontier.

discontent and disappointment, and yesterday had even the rashness to attempt to be spokesman to us in the hearing of the Rangers in favor of their being found above their pay; and Lieutenant Dutarque also attempted to inveigh against the cruelty of keeping men encamped without tents. Such topics had by these officers frequently been touched upon heretofore, but we have privately given them a lecture upon the subject, and we hope as they heard us in a proper manner, that it will have a good effect.

From such sources, however, it is plain the disorder of last night arose. The Rangers were this morning marched from camp to this place, where Mr. Drayton harangued them upon the disorder of the last night, attributing it to a few disorderly persons, who in this the first instance would by the Colonel be passed over unnoticed in hopes such lenity [leniency] would work a reformation in them. The consequences of a mutinous conduct were described as tending to expose them to the derision of their neighbors and enemies, and to cover them and the whole corps with shame, contempt, infamy and ruin, without effecting the public service; for, if they should prove unworthy of the service, they would certainly be brought to condign [appropriate] punishment, and other and more worthy rangers be found to supply their places. For they ought not to flatter themselves, that because some parts of this country were disaffected, that therefore they could desert and be in places of security. If any should desert they must sometime be off their caution and guard and then they would be seized, for a reward would be put upon their heads. No money would be thought too much to ferret them out wheresoever they should go, and dead or alive they would certainly be carried to Charles Town.

The situation of America was placed before them. On one side of the question stood almost infinite numbers [of Americans], supported by wealth and men of learning and abilities to plan and execute measures to overcome their opponents [Loyalists] who, of the Americans, were only a few men of little property and less knowledge and abilities to conduct affairs; and they were asked if they could possibly think there was any safety among such men. The obligation of their oath was strongly insisted upon, and, as to provisions, it was declared that the officers would endeavor to encourage people, of whom many were willing to supply the camp . . . They were told they were not now to look for rewards, but that they must expect them when these troubles were over. For, as in the meantime it would be known who among them behaved



⁵ William Henry Drayton had been a longtime Loyalist but in 1774 adopted the Patriot cause and explained his reversal in a published letter. Read selections from his letter, and the rebuttal by an anonymous "Back Settler," in CRISIS #7, compilation, pp. 9-10, in this collection.

SOUTH-CAROLINA.

THE actual Commencement of Hostilities against this Continent—the Threats of arbitrary Impositions from Abroad, —and the Dread of infligated Insurrections at Home,—are Causes sufficient to drive an oppressed People to the Use of Arms: We, therefore, the Subscribers, Inhabitants of this unhappy Colony, holding ourselves bound by that most sacred of all Obligations, the Duty of good Citizens towards an injured Country, and thoroughly convinced that under our present distressed Circumstances, We shall be justified before God and Man, in resisting Force by Force; do unite Ourselves, under every Tie of Religion and of Honour, and associate as a Band in her Defence against every Foe. And we do solemnly promise, that whenever her Continental or Provincial Councils shall decree it necessary, We will go forth, and be ready to sacrifice our Lives and Fortunes, in attempting to secure her FREEDOM and SAFETY.

*In General Committee
Thursday 11th May 1775.* } *Proposed in General Committee &
Unanimously approved of to be recommended
in Provincial Congress as proper to be signed by the
Inhabitants of this Province.*

South Carolina association pledge to support the Patriot stand against Britain, "to be signed by Inhabitants of this Province," adopted by the Provincial Congress, 11 May 1775

with due obedience and who conducted themselves otherwise, so all these things in time to come would be remembered by the gentlemen below, who would in private affairs show to the first all kinds of favors and acts of friendship whenever opportunities should offer; and they would carefully mark the latter and discountenance and thwart them upon every occasion. This discourse we flatter ourselves had a full effect. They were called upon to say what they pleased. Except [for] three men, they were all well satisfied and contented, and showed the most perfect submission. These three were properly checked, and the worst of them severely reprimanded and spoken to in private. . . .

As well to remove the apprehensions of the Dutch settlers as those of the interior parts — that the Rangers were posted here to force measures — and to remove every idea that we came up to issue orders to plunder and lay waste, as well as to allow the soldiers to go home to places of election and to procure necessaries [get provisions], and to show that we place a confidence in their good behavior, we have this day broken up the camp and sent them to their respective homes under their officers with orders to repair [move] to a new camp in Amelia⁶ about thirty miles below this and to join there on the 18th inst.⁷ at which place Maj. Mason is likewise under orders to appear at the same time with Capt. Purvis's Company. For the Major's personal presence in Ninety-Six⁸ is of disservice to the public affairs.

- **9 August 1775.** Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Drayton. Congaree Store, Orangeburg County, S.C.

GENTLEMEN: . . . This day we procured [assembled] a German audience by the means of a muster⁹ by the order of Col. Thomson, of which we informed you in our last. During our discourses, the falling tears from the audience showed that their hearts were penetrated and that we might hope for success. In conclusion all who were present signed the Association, except fifteen persons who mildly desired, nay begged, to consider of the affair until Friday when they would certainly meet me at the place of divine service. They have since assured me they will then subscribe. . . I expect a large meeting on Friday next, when I expect equal success, by which the whole Congaree settlement will be made parties in our proceedings. I shall then attend two larger assemblies of the people on Saturday and Sunday, and I have now no doubt of success in the Dutch settlements.

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⁶ For Amelia and other sites mentioned in the reports, see map, p. 8.

⁷ Inst., instant, i.e., of this month.

⁸ Ninety-Six: small settlement in backcountry South Carolina; site of the 1781 siege in which Loyalists were surrounded by Continental troops for nearly a month before the arrival of British troops.

⁹ Muster: military gathering for inspection or training.

■ **16 August 1775.** Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Drayton. King's Creek, near Enoree.

GENTLEMEN: . . . On Friday last I left the Congaree store and proceeded to a Dutch Church about ten miles higher up Saluda [River]. I here gave a discourse to the congregation consisting entirely of Germans, in which I thought it prudent to mix many texts of Scripture showing that our breaking off all trade and communication with non-subscribers [non-Patriots] was not any force put upon them. To my great surprise, only one of the congregation subscribed the association.¹⁰ I found that some of the non-subscribers on Wednesday last had been very active to prevent these people from associating, and had even perverted those of the fifteen who on that Wednesday had heard me and told me they had no doubt but they should subscribe at the church. Upon this, I declared that no miller who was a subscriber should grind wheat or corn for any person who was a non-subscriber. This gave an immediate shock and has given a general alarm among the Dutch, from which with some other operations I expect a desirable effect.

Hence I proceeded the next day, being Saturday, into the Fork between Broad and Saluda river to McLaurin's, where I had a pretty large meeting of Germans also, and some who had already heard me twice without the desired effect. Here I did not procure one subscriber. . . .

On Sunday I intended to have been at another place of Divine worship, but when I got near, I found Summer [a Loyalist], to avoid being present at the discourse, had gone to another place of worship. I now reflected that as he was a leading man in this neighborhood and by his absence manifested his dislike to what I came about, and also that most of my hearers on the day before were from this part of the Fork, I thought I might save myself the mortification of preaching to a people who were obstinate and would not hear. Mr. Kershaw, being of my opinion, we made the best of our way from that stiff-necked generation to this place. Thus, I may pronounce, the Dutch are not with us.

*Thus, I may pronounce,
the Dutch [Germans]
are not with us.*

■ **21 August 1775.** Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Drayton. Lawson's Fork.

GENTLEMEN: . . . I reached Col. Fletchall's¹¹ last Thursday morning before breakfast, and I there found Brown,¹² Cunningham, and Robinson [Loyalists], who had arrived the evening before, as had Mr. Tennent and Col. Richardson. Mr. Tennent and myself, after breakfast, engaged Col. Fletchall in a private conversation during near three hours. We endeavored to explain everything to him. We pressed them upon him. We endeavored to show him that we had a confidence in him. We humored him. We laughed with him. Then we recurred to argument, remonstrances, and entreaties to join his countrymen and all America. All



¹⁰ I.e., signed the pledge (association) for the Patriot side.

¹¹ One of the most influential leaders of the South Carolina backcountry, Thomas Fletchall remained staunchly resistant to Drayton's coercions but finally signed (perhaps in a drunken haze) the short-lived Truce of Ninety-Six (in effect, a declaration of neutrality by the Loyalist signers). After Congress ordered the arrest of Loyalists, Fletchall was imprisoned in Charleston for six months in 1775-76. In 1782 he was evacuated to the British Caribbean island of Jamaica, where he lived until his death in 1789.

¹² Thomas Brown, a wealthy British landowner in the Georgia backcountry, had fled Georgia for South Carolina after being tortured and nearly killed by Sons of Liberty.

that we could get from him was this. He would never take up arms against the King or his countrymen, and that the proceedings of the [Second Continental] Congress at Philadelphia were impolitic, disrespectful and irritating to the King. We charged him with having written to the [royal] Governor and with having received an answer. He confessed both. . . .

I had this day a meeting with the people in this frontier. Many present were of the other party [Tory/Loyalist], but I have the pleasure to acquaint you that these became voluntary converts. Every person received satisfaction and departed with pleasure. I finished the day with a barbecued beef. I have so ordered matters here, that this whole frontier will be formed into volunteer companies, but as they are at present under Fletchall's command, they insist upon being formed into a regiment independent of him, and I flatter myself you will think this method of weakening Fletchall to be consistent with sound policy. These people are active and spirited. They are staunch in our favor, are capable of forming a good barrier against the Indians, and of being a severe check upon Fletchall's people (upon whom they border), if they should think of quitting their habitations under the banners of Fletchall or his companions. For these reasons, and to enable them to act with vigor, I shall take the liberty to supply them from Fort Charlotte with a small quantity of ammunition; for now they have not one ounce, when they shall be formed into regular companies. Several companies will be formed by this day week. . . .

Within twelve days, I purpose [plan] to be at Colonel Thomson's camp, where I think it will be advisable that I should remain till I shall see every spark of insurrection extinguished; but in regard to this, I shall regulate myself by your orders on the subject which I hope to receive by the time I arrive at the camp. If Kirkland shall be seized, without doubt a commotion will follow, and if he goes off with impunity and without question, it will be fatal to the discipline of the army — especially the rangers. But this is not all. Vigorous measures are absolutely necessary. If a dozen persons [Loyalists] are allowed to be at large, our progress has been in vain, and we shall be involved in a civil war in spite of our teeth. In giving you this information, I tell a melancholy truth, but I do my duty. . . .

If a dozen persons [Loyalists] are allowed to be at large, our progress has been in vain, and we shall be involved in a civil war in spite of our teeth. In giving you this information, I tell a melancholy truth, but I do my duty.

For, as our continuance in the [back]country will be of but little benefit in the Dutch [German] settlements and the disaffected quarters [areas] while under the influence of Fletchall's people, so I make no doubt but that Mr. Tennent will choose to return to [Charles] Town, sensible that his presence in the country will not be of any advantage in the way of expounding our political texts to the people.

■ **24 August 1775.** Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Drayton & Tennent. Ford's upon Enoree.

GENTLEMEN: — We arrived here yesterday and met with Col. Fletchall, Kirkland, the two Cunninghams and Brown. By the contrivances of the heads of the [Loyalist] party, very few people met us. One thousand men meet here in general at musters. When Fletchall's paper was signed, there were about 1,500, on the field; but we had not above 250 hearers, and a great many of these were our friends from other parts. There was not one man of Cunningham's Company present. He told us that he acquainted his men that if they were satisfied with their present opinions there was no occasion for them to come to hear us. Other Captains told their men the Colonel left it to them to come or not as they pleased, and if they stayed away he would not be angry with them.

The most perfect good order prevailed with the people who heard us with much attention. But Kirkland treated the Congress, the Committee, the Council, and ourselves with the highest insolence. Nay, he was on the point of assaulting Mr. Drayton and in all probability would have done it, which would have brought on bloodshed, but that the pressure of the people about Mr. Drayton gave him to understand that an attack by him would be premature. Imagine every indecency of language, every misrepresentation, every ungenerous and unjust charge against the American politics that could alarm the

people and give them an evil impression of our designs against their liberties and the rights of Great Britain. Imagine all you can on these points and you will not exceed what we heard as well from Kirkland, as Brown. Our indignation was painful for we were obliged to conceal it, and our situation was as disagreeable as you can well conceive. Brown loudly declared that when the King's troops arrived, he would join them against us, and he hoped every other person in these parts would do the same.

■ **30 August 1775.** Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Drayton. At Mr. Hammond's near Augusta.¹³

GENTLEMEN: — I arrived here last night from Ninety-six where Mr. Tennent and myself had a pretty numerous meeting. Mr. Tennent is gone for a few days towards the Long Canes, and I came here to see the people of Augusta and the settlements in these parts in my way to Amelia. By various accounts that I received on the road yesterday afternoon, last night, and this morning, it appears to be a fact that Kirkland is actually in arms to attack Augusta and Fort Charlotte. The King's men, as they are called, were summoned to meet yesterday at a place about twenty miles from hence. They separated last night, and I am informed they will meet again in two or three days. They have been very diligent in obtaining arms.

■ **1 September 1775.** Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Tennent. Long Canes.

GENTLEMEN: — . . . I parted from Mr. Drayton on Monday morning. He steered his course to Augusta and thence designed for the camp at Amelia. I thought it necessary to visit the settlements on this side [of the river] Saluda. Met a large congregation yesterday and found the people divided in their sentiments. Spoke at least two hours to them to good effect. The prevailing party here is for American [Patriot] measures, by the agency of some of our worthy members, but they need confirmation. I have, therefore, appointed three meetings at which I expect to see the greater number of the disaffected. Shall then cross over into Fletchall's Regiment once more . . . where we expect great opposition, if not violence, from Cunningham's party. Brown will bring them to blood if he can — but still hope it may be prevented. I consider myself as running great risks but think it my duty. Our visit has given their party a great shock, divided their friends, and strengthened the American interest much.

■ **10 September 1775.** Report to the S. C. Council of Safety by Tennent. St. Mathew's Parish.

GENTLEMEN: — Being on my return from the frontiers of South Carolina, where the Honorable Mr. Drayton and myself were sent by the Council of Safety of our Province, I think it my duty to acquaint you that there exists in those parts a most dangerous conspiracy against the lives and liberties of these Colonies.

I think it my duty to acquaint you that there exists in those parts a most dangerous conspiracy against the lives and liberties of these Colonies.

Encouraged by Government and by the Tories [Loyalists] in your town and in Charlestown they have gone to great lengths. They do not hesitate to boast that they are furnished with ammunition and that even artillery are at their service any day. This I have by a trusty friend from Cunningham's mouth. I have great reason to think that they are mistaken when they boast of many thousands ready to come down at the [royal] Governor's signal — but that they have some hundreds actually enlisted, if not under pay, I make not the least doubt. That they depend upon the Cherokee nation to join their camp when it forms, and have great hopes of the Creeks, they do not pretend to keep any longer a secret. I am in possession of an affidavit by which it appears that the malcontents on the frontiers expect to gather into forts and suffer [permit] the savages to pass on and massacre the associated inhabitants.

By these circumstances, you gentlemen will see the necessity of an immediate effort to crush the sedition and save an effusion of innocent blood to the danger of these Provinces, and especially of the aid

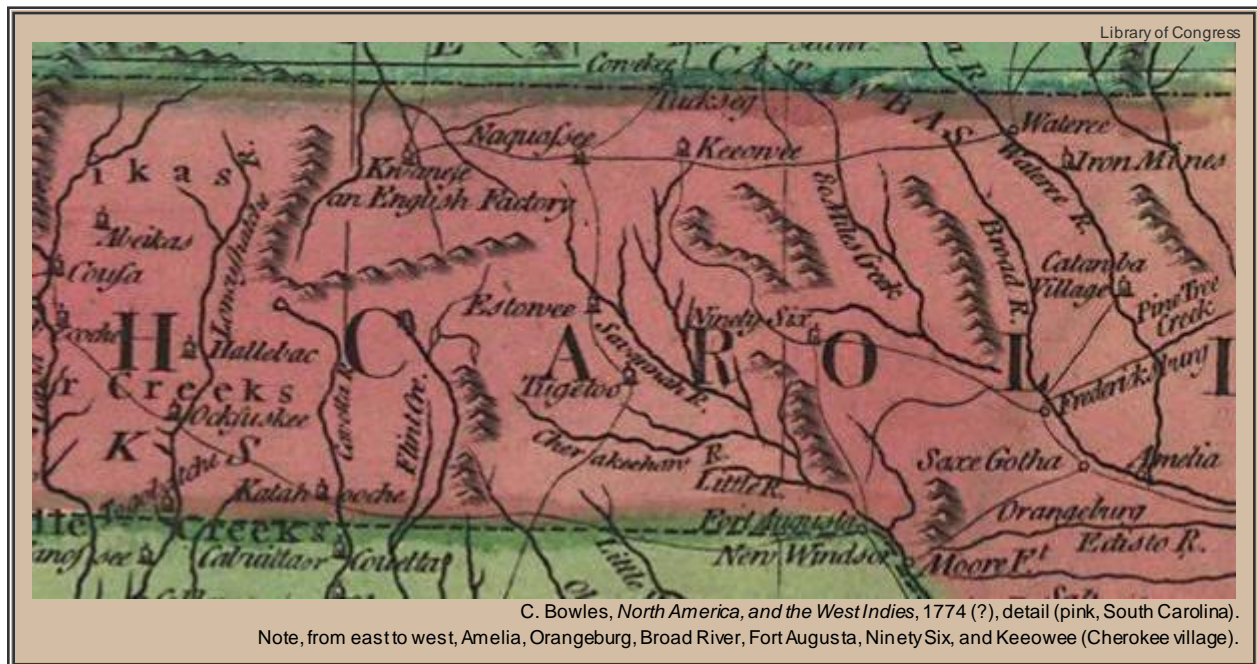
¹³ Present-day North Augusta, South Carolina, on the South Carolina-Georgia border.

which you have already given to that important measure. It will be prudent to have at least one thousand five hundred, if not two thousand men at hand when it is done, and a number not far short of that is, I hope, by this time in motion in the unhappy district. The King's men were already assembling at a ford above Augusta, and had it not been for the present unexpected armament before this time, there is reason to apprehend that place would have been assaulted.

The tour which Mr. Drayton and I have made through the back parts has greatly weakened but not discouraged them. Many of their best hands are taken off from them but supported by the party in both provinces who plainly intend to make those parts an asylum [for Loyalists] — they obstinately persevere. Expresses [messages] are constantly passing to and from them to Charlestown and Savannah, and I have reason to think supplies of ammunition go up by single horses and in covered wagons from both places. Cunningham openly confesses that he has fifteen thousand pounds weight of good powder lately received.

These things I thought it my duty to inform you of without loss of so much time as it would take to let it pass through the regular channel of our Council of Safety.

Five days after this last report, Patriot forces captured Fort Johnson in Charleston harbor and took control of the coastal region. The next day Drayton, who had raised a militia of over two hundred men, succeeded in negotiating the short-lived "truce of Ninety-Six" with Thomas Fletchall, the most powerful Loyalist leader in the backcountry. But as war escalated on the coast, backcountry hostilities erupted into armed conflict, and soon the backcountry was under Patriot control. In October 1775 the Continental Congress called for the arrest of all Loyalists dangerous "to the liberties of America," and many high country Loyalists were imprisoned in Charleston.



C. Bowles, *North America, and the West Indies*, 1774 (?), detail (pink, South Carolina).
 Note, from east to west, Amelia, Orangeburg, Broad River, Fort Augusta, Ninety Six, and Keeowee (Cherokee village).