

# **Ezekiel Craft**

## **Patriot, Farmer, Clergyman and Politician**

By Arley McCormick

April 17, 1775 marked the date the British commander decided to march on Lexington and Concord to secure arms warehoused there in preparation for the Colonials resistance against the British Crown. At the end of the day, on April 19, 1775 49 colonial subjects of the Crown lay dead or dying, 39 wounded and 5 missing. The contest resonated throughout the colonies and around the world signaling the beginning of a revolution.

Years before that remarkable day in Massachusetts, on January 10, 1762 in Duplin County, North Carolina, Ezekiel Craft was born to James and Sara Craft and at age thirteen, Ezekiel would no doubt be aware of the fighting in Massachusetts but probably without considering its significance. North Carolina subjects of the Crown were reacting strongly against the British tax and reorganization schemes that were introduced in 1763 and when the news of that “shot heard around the world” reached the county many believed that a fight was not too far away. They were right.

In February 1776 Tories were beaten at Moore’s Creek Bridge. Ezekiel was nearing his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday and may have known that the citizens of North Carolina rallying to intercept the British had repulsed the first invasion. It would be 1780 before the British and their Tory allies would return to North Carolina.

During Ezekiel’s youth he would have ample opportunities to adapt to the warrior culture of the colonies. North Carolina citizen soldiers joined George

Washington in Maryland in 1754 to fight for the English Crown in the French and Indian war. Veterans of the British tactical disasters of 1756 would reminisce at church meetings and other gatherings for years. The British inspired agreement between the British, Colonials, and the Cherokee (that set the Cherokee against the French), the Shawnee, and Catawba tribes in 1757. It was an uneasy agreement that eventually caused a succession of violent episodes between the Cherokee and the colonists on the frontiers of South Carolina, Virginia, and North Carolina ending with a massive relocation of settlers from the frontiers to the interior of the colonies.

With the successful conclusion of the French and Indian war in 1763, North Carolinians were left to defend themselves against periodic Cherokee incursions and the citizen soldiers of the colony would respond to punish the Cherokee for their barbarism. Then there were taxes to pay the English King; saddled with a massive debt as a result of fighting the Seven Years War, as the French and Indian War was referred to in Europe. The Crown failed to provide manpower to defend the frontiers and increased taxes to pay for the French and Indian war contributed to the fight for American independence.

It is not clear when or if the Craft's migrated from Duplin County to Guilford County, as farm families normally did not travel too far from their farms and Guilford county was over 160 miles away. It would be as much as a 7-day trip to enlist if Ezekiel's family did not reside there.

The Continental Congress used militia drafts in the late 1770s to maintain the Continental Army, and substitution was permitted. Annual recruiting began in 1777 with a soldier's term of service not to exceed

one year and it would end in December each year. Quotas were established for each state and in turn each state distributed the quota among the towns. An appointed militia commander called for volunteers in a town and when the quota was not met, the state, town, or private citizens (sometimes all three) could offer a bounty to fill the quotas. Ezekiel responded to an offer from John White to act as his substitute in the Militia on or about November 10, 1778. At the tender age of 16 he became a drummer in the North Carolina militia.

Drummers and fife players played a unique role in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century armies. The Commander of large formations communicated to his units with the fife, drum, and bugle. They entertained in camp and set the pace of march. Each instrument, depending on the terrain could be heard for several miles. The high pitch of the fife and the low pitch of the drum could be heard even through the sounds of a battlefield. The instruments were also used to signal all the events of the day; reveille, break camp, dinner, last call, form for battle. Drumming was a task, while its significance to the formation is frequently overlooked, young teenagers like Ezekiel at age 16, who was probably a normal undersized man not carrying the weight or strength for toting a 10-lb. long rifle or standard British Army issue Old Bess with extra ball and powder plus rations for endlessly long miles of march, would be suitable to be a drummer. That is how he began his contribution to the Revolution.

According to Ezekiel's application for pension he was attached to Captain Enoch Davis' company of Colonel Francis Locke's regiment under General Griffith Rutherford. His military training would take place on the march through Rowan County, Salisbury,

Mecklenburg, and Charlotte into South Carolina, through Camden and down the Santee river to Moncks Corner, Ten Mile House to the Savannah River at Purrysburg, and up and down the left bank of the Savannah. When his six-month term of service ended on April 9, 1779, his captain discharged him.

During the spring of 1780, the American Southern Department was beginning to feel the pressure from Regular British Troops. The Colonial Army defined the region composed of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia as well as the western frontier south of Virginia as the Southern Department. The geography and weather provided the possibility of year-round operations and thus dictated a more independent command than the northern states.

Ezekiel had obviously made his way home and enjoyed the respite from marching and with the news that the British were invading Charleston, South Carolina the bounty was good and on May 10, 1780, he enlisted as a substitute for Jacob McDaniel in the Randolph County, North Carolina militia. His Captain was Robert McLane. His Colonel was John Collier and his unit was attached to General Richard Caswell's brigade.

The tranquility of the Southern Department had been disrupted by British sponsored Cherokee raids from time to time but grew worse when the first British Army under General Charles Cornwallis, captured Charleston on May 12, 1780, two days after Ezekiel enlisted for the second time. There was little time for training only preparations for a meeting engagement. No doubt there were delays while commanders recruited and equipped the new members of the militia and while there was a sense of urgency, consolidating an effective combat force took time. They marched to

Ramsey's Mill to Cross Creek and to the upper part of Randolph County then continued near Pedee in South Carolina and on to the river where they linked with General Rutherford. General Rutherford directed a march to Lynches Creek to join Major General Horatio Gates.

Controlling Camden's road network and using Francis Marion (the Swamp Fox) to raid south of Camden would force General Cornwallis to hold his 2,200-man force in Charleston. Initially, the route of march options was discussed; whether to use an indirect route through friendly country for better security and collect rations or take the more direct route between the swamps and low land. Certainly, the direct route was shorter but also more dangerous. Adding to the matrix of competing priorities one of Gate's commanders wanted to raid British outposts a little further east and of course the baggage train needed protection. Each mission would reduce the strength of the organization when it faced Cornwallis. All the strategic and operational consideration regarding the expected engagement would take place without Ezekiel's knowledge or input. He was 17 years old and a drummer.

On July 27, Major General Gates and Brigadier General Johann Baron de Kalb's departed the Deep River camp in North Carolina. General Gates chose the direct route through Tory territory and directly to Camden. General Gates was confident his Colonial Militia and schooled Colonial Regulars could win battles. General Gates expected General Cornwallis to remain in Charleston leaving Camden unattended but Cornwallis became aware of General Gates movement on 14 August and sent an advance guard through Camden while he followed with another 1000 men. It

was the British advanced guard that the Colonials met at 2 am on the morning of 16 August about 5 miles north of Camden and each side pulled back to wait for dawn.

General Gates was not prepared to engage an experienced British force. He apparently had anticipated Loyalist troops that, while not easily handled, would be easier than the battle tested regulars of the Welsh Regiment. As the sun was rising the orders were transmitted through drum, bugle, and fife. Commanders departed from General Gates side. With his force depleted by other missions and dysentery, just shy of 3,000 soldiers were on the field to face British Regulars numbering over 2,200.

The Royal Welsh Regiment faced the Virginia Militia on General Gates left. The center was held by the North Carolina Militia and Ezekiel, probably positioned directly behind the infantry and the few artillery pieces integrated in front of the main line of battle, would see the British forming just over 100 yards in front of his North Carolinian's and could hear the orders of both their officers and his. The tension would steal his breath as the reality of the first battle sunk in. He, no doubt observed short skirmishes while on the march, but now he stood eye to eye across a field and no understanding of what hell awaited him. Ezekiel may have wondered why he chose to enlist and more appropriately why he decided to stay with the unit even though his enlistment contract had ended 3 or 4 days previous. He was, at that point in time, technically a civilian not a soldier except for the minor detail that the Commanding General could extend enlistments during an emergency.

General Gates tactical decision was fatal.

The battle tested red coated Royal Welsh Fusiliers facing the Virginians began to fix bayonets. The Virginians had no bayonets and were armed with hunting rifles and a few British Brown Bess flintlocks. Slowly at first, the Virginians ranks began to waver and the officers, no doubt, screamed to maintain order and receive the British charge. General Gates directed the right flank, under General de Kalb, to advance. The canon did not fire, the left flank did not fire and the Virginia militia formation fell apart. The British cavalry commanded by the notorious Banastre Tarleton, recognizing the opportunity to add to the chaos, attacked, and enveloped the American left flank. In less than 30 minutes the battle was totally lost. General Gates abandoned General de Kalb to die on the field and ran to Charlotte, North Carolina. Ezekiel had no choice but to abandon his post and scurry as far north as possible.

At the end of the day, 900 Americans lay dead or wounded and 1000 captured. Ezekiel got away. It was the worst defeat of an American Army in the field and opened the Southern Department to the exploitation of Loyalists and the British Army.

Ezekiel was sufficiently motivated and 11 days later on August 27, 1780, he again volunteered in the Randolph County militia for six months under Captain John Hinds and Colonel John Luttrell's regiment of Horse. They were stationed at a Barracks in Chatham County, North Carolina until December till they marched into South Carolina and at Cheraw Hill, joined the army of Major General Nathaniel Greene, proceeded up the Yadkin to the Trading Ford until his term expired and he received his discharge.

Ezekiel was not discouraged. On March 30, 1781 Ezekiel volunteered for three months in the Randolph

County Regiment under Captain John Hinds, now commanded by Colonel Thomas Dugan, Colonel Luttrell was killed in action on September 13, 1781.

Repeatedly the notorious David Fanning's name was spoken in disgust. The Randolph regiment's primary base camp was at Bell's Mills on Deep River. From that point, it could deploy against the Tories at various times and places as the situation dictated. On one occasion, in the company of Captain Hinds they attacked a Tory formation and, in the fight, Ezekiel was seriously cut and mangled by sabers and left for dead on the field. When the belligerents withdrew into the countryside two ladies, Lucretia Stroud and Margaret Bane were inspecting the casualties and found Ezekiel bleeding, near death, and nursed him back to life.

Anyone may consider his contribution sufficient but instead in January or February 1782, he volunteered for six months in Randolph County's rangers. Under Captain William Gray. Several companies were raised to guard the civil authorities and their equipment and supplies collected to support North Carolina against the incessant assaults of the Tories.

During this enlistment, he served under Colonel Thomas Dugan at Mrs. Spink's plantation and when the infamous Colonel Fanning was spotted the Rangers assaulted. It was a brisk fight and Ezekiel was once again badly wounded. The incident occurred most timely for a couple of Whigs as the Loyalist Colonel Fanning was commencing to hang them when rudely surprised by Ezekiel and Colonel Thomas Dugan's Rangers. Colonel Fanning was captured and a short time later Ezekiel was discharged.

1782 was a decisive year for the Colonials. Early in 1782 the British Parliament voted to suspend all



offensive operations in North America. Of course, it took a few months for the political guidance to reach the field operating forces but their vote was principally guided when General Cornwallis' defeat by a combined force of American and German land forces, and the French blockade at Yorktown on October 19, 1781. It took till September 3, 1783, for the belligerent parties to sign the Treaty of Paris, formally ending the war, and Britain recognizing the sovereignty of the United States.

For the final time, on the September 1, 1782 Ezekiel volunteered for four months and served as a minute man or ranger for the state of North Carolina under Captains Hinds and York. When the news reached the countryside, it took time for the Loyalists to accept their effort was futile and while the Colonial Army, Continentals and Militia, remained vigilant, the United States political focus shifted to building a country rather than fighting.

At the tender age of 20 Ezekiel's war with the British ended and during his war he had met the two most notorious villains in the Southern Department, British Cavalryman Col Banastre Tarleton and Tory Colonel David Fanning.

Ezekiel returned to farming in North Carolina when his enlistment ended. The tax records of Wilks County indicate he witnessed a deed for land near Brier Creek in 1789 but in 1790 there is no indication that he owned land. He may have been a tenant or squatter but records do not support the assumption but it does imply that he was not particularly keen on following through with legal documentation. It is also difficult to date the marriage of Ezekiel to his wife Sally precisely, but it appears to be about 1796. After his marriage the challenge of greater opportunity or cheaper land,

whatever the calling, Ezekiel at age 37 departed North Carolina for East Tennessee in 1799 and moved west through the Blue Ridge Mountains settling on the Kentucky/Tennessee border well north of Knoxville with his family and made his home in the future County of Claiborne in Tennessee. Claiborne County was created from Grainger and Hawkins county in 1801. Ezekiel became active in civic affairs of the County. Upon Claiborne becoming a county and the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions organized, he was selected as the counties first Registrar. The Minute Docket for the September Term, 1801, shows he served as chairman of the Grand Jury. Records for the November term, 1806 indicate his reappointment for the following term. During the May term of 1807, Ezekiel served as security for William Williams appointment of Constable and the Court awarded him \$30 for transcribing the original book of the Register according to an act of the assembly. He and Sara were apparently doing well and became acquainted with the Huntsville founder and name sake John Hunt as well as a number of others that eventually made their way to Huntsville. It may have been John Hunt's influence that encouraged them to migrate to Madison County. Ezekiel and Sara were also becoming wealthy with offspring. Children were arriving from the union nearly on an annual bases Sara (Sally), Ezekiel Jr., Labun, Jane, Elizabeth, Ann, and Hugh.

By the fall of 1808, Alabama Fever, spreading from Virginia to Georgia struck Ezekiel and he packed up his family and headed to the Mississippi Territory and Madison County, Alabama specifically. He is listed on the Squatters' Census of 1809. He and Archealous Craft, who could have been his brother or cousin, are listed on the Madison County tax lists beginning in

1810. Ezekiel settled near Big Cove where he acquired several land patents and became a farmer.

The Register of Applications & Permissions in Madison County, Mississippi Territory indicate Ezekiel's January 20, 1809 land application was granted on February 9, 1809. He received 320 acres between Aldridge Creek and Green Mountain. His brother settled in Cotaco County, now Morgan County, Alabama.

Ezekiel was a staunch Primitive Baptist and may have been the founding pastor of the Meridian Line Baptist Church. The church was established sometime before October 1810 when it joined the Elk River Association. In 1812, it reported 31 members with Ezekiel Craft as its Pastor. The association was the only form of church union among Primitive Baptists but in no way interfered with the absolute independence of the individual churches. Messengers from the different churches met once a year and preserved a loose form of organization.

*“Ezekiel Craft apparently became a licensed minister in 1818 and 1819 he was the sole messenger from Penal Baptist Church to the Flint River Baptist Association, which largely functioned in Madison County and adjacent areas of north Alabama and lower central Tennessee. The church had 11 members when it affiliated with the Association in 1818, probably the same year it was organized. It was represented by Ezekiel Craft and again in 1819. In the next three years, 1820-22, it had no letter or messenger at the Association, and from*

*1823 on, there is no entry to the church in the Association records.” F. Wilburn Helmbold, Curator, Alabama Baptist Historical Society, Samford University Library.*

The civic minded Ezekiel made the most of his time. By 1820 he added a new responsibility to farming and preaching when on April 12, he was appointed the Justice of the Peace. Numerous records illustrate marriages he performed as both a Justice of the Peace and a Minister of the Gospel.

A couple of years later in 1823, Ezekiel and three other civic minded citizens were elected the first County Commissioners of Madison County. Each commissioner came from a different section of the county and Ezekiel represented the eastern portion. They had jurisdiction over a variety of matters including the regulation of taverns. His duties required him to periodically inspect and regulate annually, the schedule of charges to be made by public houses. His duty may have contributed to some of his opponents and Methodists to view him as less than a pious preacher.

The commissioners' appointed all county officers not elected by the people and those included the county assessor and collector, coroner, treasurer and surveyor. In February, 1823, these offices were filled by various appointments and Commissioner Craft appointed himself, County Treasurer. He served as Treasurer from 1823 to 1826, apparently holding both offices at the same time.

He remained active with his ministry and Big Cove joined the Flint River Association in 1822, when their number was 10; his church grew until 1827 when its

membership reached 88 and began a decline to 38. His critics were vocal about his ministry and complained he was never a great advantage to the denomination or to the cause of Christ. One unknown orator proclaimed; *“We have learned from some of his neighbors and old acquaintances, particularly our old venerable Methodist brother, Mr. R\_\_\_, that Mr. Craft cannot preach, neither can he be considered an orderly man.”*

He was the minister of the Big Cove Church and while not universally revered, non-the-less, Ezekiel continued as pastor until after 1840. “Brother R’s” comments may very well be related to Ezekiel’s duty of inspecting Taverns in the County which required him to verify the quality of the products offered by a Tavern.

On September 22, 1825 Ezekiel was authorized to perform marriages as a Minister of the Gospel by the State of Alabama.

On October 11, 1832, he applied for a Federal pension and executed an affidavit detailing his service during the Revolutionary War and he was awarded an annual allowance of \$93.33. He also, as a clergyman, swore an affidavit supporting the pension application of Benjamin Glover, a personal friend and patriot whose son married Ezekiel’s daughter, Jane, in 1820.

He continued to serve his neighbors and in 1840 was the appraiser of the perishable property estate of Thomas Vann.

He resisted the lure of new land when the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was signed, opening east central Mississippi to settlement. Many of his extended families moved to the new land but Ezekiel remained in Madison County. On October 17, 1843, at the age of 81 he died. The day before, probably anticipating his

death, he deeded property to his two-year old Grandson, Ezekiel B. Craft. It was customary in Alabama at the time for the youngest male member of the family to inherit. Ezekiel died intestate. The Orphan Court Minutes for January 1, 1845 record letters of Administration for his estate were granted to his son, Ezekiel, with another son, Joseph, and William Write as securities.

### **The Rest of the Story**

In 1976, the Madison County Military Heritage Commission placed a plaque in the lobby of the County Courthouse in Huntsville along with Revolutionary War veterans known to live in the County and more recently, the Daughters of the American Revolution chapter rededicated the plaque on the Veterans Memorial Park Patriots walkway.

Craft's decedents continue to reside in Madison County and you can meet one; the proprietor of Grandma's House at 3980 Old Highway 431, Owens Cross Roads, AL; an outstanding restaurant featuring traditional Southern cuisine.

His gravesite is in the Moon Cemetery on Cave Spring Road, Owens Cross Roads, AL.



### **References:**

- History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Alabama; Flint River Association
- Family papers, research, and interview