**New River Notes**

Since 1998 - Historical and Genealogical Resources
for the Upper New River Valley of North Carolina and Virginia

**Capture and Rescue of Benjamin Cleveland**



**The Old Perkins place where Benjamin Cleveland was captured**

Benjamin Cleveland was captured on the 22nd day of April, 1781, while on a visit to his tenant, Jesse Duncan, at the lower end of the Old Fields -- probably the very spot at which the late Nathan Waugh lived and died. Captain William Riddle was the leader of the gang which captured him, they having stolen his horses from Duncan's barn the night before and led them up south fork of New River into a laurel thicket just above te house then occupied by Joseph and Timothy Perkins, about one mile distant.

There were six or eight men with Riddle, and when they reached Benjamin Cutbirth's home the day before, four miles above Duncan's home, and failed to get any information from him, they abused him shamefully and left him under guard. Cleveland ran into the ambush and was taken into the Perkins house, which stool on the site of the house in which Nathan Waugh's son, Charles, now resides. (1915) The photo shows the present house and apple tree in its front under which it is said Cleveland was sitting when captured. Into this house, Zachariah Wells followed Cleveland and attempted to shoot him, but that brave (?) man seized Abigail Walters, who was present, and kept her between him and his would-be assassin.

Cleveland was then taken up New River to the mouth of Elk Creek, and thence to "what has since been known as Riddle's Knob." This is some fourteen from Old Fields and in Watauga County. Here they camped for the night. But they had been followed by young Daniel Cutbirth and a youth named Walters, Jesse Duncan, John Shirley, William Calloway, Samuel McQueen and Benjamin Greer, while Joseph Calloway mounted a horse and hastened to notify Captain Robert Cleveland, Ben's brother, on Lewis' Fork of the Yadkin. Five of these in Robert's advance party fired on Riddle's gang at the Wolf's Den early the next morning, and Cleveland dropped behind the log on which he had been sitting slowly writing passes for the Tories, fearing that when he should finish doing so he would be killed. Only Wells was wounded, the rest escaping, including Riddle's wife. As it was thought that Wells would die from his wound, he was left on the ground to meet his fate alone. But he survived.



**The Wolf's Den, where Cleveland was rescued**

There is still a tradition in the neighborhood of the Wolf's Den that Ben Greer killed or wounded Riddle at that place soon after Cleveland's rescue, one version saying that Riddle was only wounded and then taken to Wilkes and hanged. Indeed, the place in the gap between Pine Orchard and Huckleberry Knob, through which the wagon road from Todd to Riddle's Fork of Meat Camp Creek now runs, is still pointed out as that at which Greer and his men camped in the cold and wind, without fire or tent, till they saw the campfire on Riddle's Knob flame up, after which they crept up to that lonely spot and either killed or wounded the redoubtable Tory.

**Cleveland Hangs Riddle**

Soon after Cleveland's rescue Riddle and his men made a night raid into the Yadkin Valley, where, on King's Creek, they captured two of Cleveland's soldiers, David and John Witherspoon, and "spirited them away into the mountain region on the Watauga River in what is now Watauga County," where they both were sentenced to be shot, when it was proposed that if they would take the oath of allegiance to the king, repair to their home and speedily return with the O'Neal mare - a noble animal - and join the Tory band, their lives would be spared. This the Witherspoons agreed to, and returned with not only the mare, but with Col. Ben Herndon and a party also, when they captured Riddle, Reeves and Goss, "killing and dispersing the others."

These were taken to Wilkesboro, court martialed and executed" on the hill adjoining the village, "on a stately oak, which is yet (1881) standing and pointed out to strangers at Wilkesboro." Well, too, was captured and taken to Hughes' Bottom, one mile below Cleveland's Round About home-place, and hanged by plow lines from a tree on the river bank, without trial and in spite of the protestations of James Gwyn, a lad of thirteen, whose noble nature revolted at such barbarity. But Cleveland's cruelty was too well known to need further comment, for it is recorded of him that he once forced an alleged horse-thief to cut off his own ears with a dull case knife to escape death by hanging - all without trial or evidence.

Cleveland moved to South Carolina at the close of the Revolutionary War, where he died while sitting at the breakfast table, in October, 1806, in the sixty-ninth year of his age. Cleveland County in this State was named in his honor. He was buried in the forks of the Tugalo and Chauga, Oconee County, South Carolina, but his grave with a stone marking it is in the churchyard of New Hope Baptist Church, near Stauntion, Wilkes County, North Carolina, according to several recent statements of Col. J. H. Taylor, the father of Mrs. John Stansbury of Boone. However, some claim that this is Robert Cleveland's grave stone. So much for two versions of Riddle's death.

But there is yet another version, for Col. W. W. Presnell, for many years register of deeds for Watauga County and a brave one-armed Confederate soldier, still points out at the foot of a ridge north of James Blair's residence, on Brushy Fork Creek, two low rock cliffs, between which and the hollow just east of them stood until recently a large white-thorn tree upon which W. H. Dugger and other reputable citizens of a past day said Cleveland had hanged Riddle and three of his companions. Certain it is, according to Dr. Draper, that "Colonel Cleveland was active at this period in sending our strong scouting parties to scour the mountain regions, and if possible, utterly break up the Tory bands still infesting the frontiers." Other say that two of these men were named Sneed and the third was named Warren.

Other Links:

[Historical Sketches of Wilkes County, NC](http://www.newrivernotes.com/nc/crouch.htm)
[History of Western NC, Revolutionary Days](http://www.newrivernotes.com/nc/wnc5.htm)

Sources:

*A History of Watauga County, North Carolina*, John Preston Arthur, published 1915 - file created by Faye Moran

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