

KETTLE CREEK, GEORGIA:
THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR BATTLE OF THE CANEBRAKES

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On February 14, 1779, the most famous Revolutionary War battle in Georgia took place. Near where the town of Washington would be founded a year later, almost 1,000 Americans decided for themselves individually how they would stand in that conflict. A mysterious Irish immigrant named James or John Boyd had led 600 to 800 Loyalists (also called Tories or Scopholites) on horseback from the North and South Carolina border in a hurried and desperate effort to reach the British army then in Augusta, Georgia. Some of his following came to join the King's army or to receive its protection as ethnic minorities oppressed by their native born American neighbors, while others traveled along only from threats and intimidation. Along their route, with drums beating, fifes playing, and flags waving, they stole horses and burned forts. On that Sunday morning of February 14, however, the some 600 men who still followed Boyd after a battle in cane choked Van's Creek, Georgia, a few days earlier, were thoroughly defeated in an attack by 200 South Carolina militiamen under Colonel Andrew Pickens and the 140 Wilkes County Georgia militia under Colonel John Dooly and Lieutenant Colonel Elijah Clarke. Amidst a long string of disasters for the Patriot cause, Kettle Creek would be remembered by Andrew Pickens and others as a populist defining moment that demonstrated that America's war for independence would not be lost in the South.

One aspect of the battle went more appreciated in 1779 than in recent times, the connection to canebrakes. Kettle Creek likely drew its name from a fish trap (a "kittle" or "kiddle") set by Native Americans in years past that was made from and placed among its American cane. James Hammett had a farm there that likely took advantage of the cane to feed and fence his cattle for nothing. The battle would not have occurred had Boyd not stopped there to butcher one of the cows for his hungry men.

The wild American giant or swamp cane (*Arundinaria gigantea*) is an evergreen bamboo that forms long thin stalks with few and scattered leaves. It grows in colonies called canebrakes and in any soil and altitude. It prospers in streams but can choke waterways. (In the summer of 1920, the local farmers had a channel dug to reduce Kettle Creek's flooding and, in the process, destroyed the creek's canebrakes.) Individual stalks can reach heights of thirty-three feet and a thickness of almost three inches. Its canebrakes can form almost impenetrable natural walls.

Native Americans found many uses for the cane. Archaeologists have even found the shape of walls of their ancient huts outlined in modern cane plants. Found from New York to Florida to Texas, this plant became part of the story of many battles of the Revolution from the fight in the Great Canebrake to the battlefield of Cowpens, where the National Park Service is today working to restore a canebrake. Cattle so devastated the canebrakes that the American cane has become an endangered species.

At 11 AM on February 14, 1779, the cane determined the battle of Kettle Creek. Pickens had ordered Dooly and Clarke to pass around the Hammett farm to cross the flooded stream and cut off the Loyalists. John Dooly's 100 horsemen could not get through the canebrakes and instead came up behind Boyd, mortally wounding the Loyalist leader and defeating his men from the rear of the Hammett farm. This change of plan caused by the canebrakes thus rescued Pickens and his men from the ambush they had found themselves in while preventing the Loyalists camped at the Hammett farm from escaping.

Elijah Clarke, with another forty horsemen on the left of Boyd's position at the farm, found the trail that eventually crossed the creek. They rode over today's War Hill, only to find that most of Boyd's following had squeezed through the canebrakes and camped on the southwest side of the creek. Earlier that morning as Boyd's men passed over the hill, Dooly's scouts found themselves cut off and one of them, Thomas Ramsey, shouted out that the Loyalists

were under attack from the rear as a ruse. Boyd and only some of his men returned to the Hammett farm to meet this fictional attack that soon became Andrew Pickens' very real assault. The vast majority of the Loyalists, already through the cane swamp, had camped on the hill on the southwest side of the creek.

Led by Major John Spurgeon of South Carolina, hundreds of these Loyalists now proceeded back across the creek to come to Boyd's aid. Clarke then led a charge into that cane choked swamp only to have his horse shot out from under him by the Loyalists on the rise across the creek and beyond the canebrakes. He and his men, however, pressed on into a hail of bullets, some of which have recently been found by archaeologist Dan Elliott of the Lamar Institute.

Spurgeon and his men found themselves in a bottle neck caused by the canebrakes. Although they surely outnumbered Clarke's men, the Loyalists could only emerge from the swamp a few men at a time, where they fell to the marksmanship of the Wilkes County militiamen. At length, Spurgeon and the some 270 men still with him withdrew to the fort at the nearby town of Wrightsborough. Clarke chose not to cross the creek and place his men in the same trap but in reverse. Overall, twenty men identified as Loyalists died in the battle of Kettle Creek, while Pickens and Dooly lost seven men killed and fifteen wounded.

Andrew Pickens in 1811 wrote a detailed account of the battle in which he stressed the cane that choked the creek. Historian Hugh McCall may have been in the battle or heard the details from Andrew Pickens, or most likely, from his old friend Elijah Clarke. He too mentioned the cane and the role it played in the battle in his 1816 history of the American Revolution in Georgia. In 1894, a retelling of that account in the *Carolina Spartan*, a newspaper published in Spartanburg near where Boyd began his march to Georgia, rightly entitled that article about the 1779 fight at Kettle Creek as "The Battle of the Canebrakes."

Descendants of Elijah Clarke, Andrew Pickens, and many of the soldiers there that day have intermarried, giving Kettle Creek its own special genealogy. Along the now dry original creek bed, however, today's visitor to the battlefield can still see small descendents of a major participant in that battle—examples of American cane!

For more on the Battle of Kettle Creek see Daniel T. Elliott, *Stirring up a Hornet's Nest: The Kettle Creek Battlefield Survey Lamar Institute Publications Series Report Number 131* (Savannah: The Lamar Institute, 2008). Online:

http://www.thelamarinstitute.org/images/PDFs/publication_131.pdf