

World of Toil and Strife: Community Transformation in Backcountry South Carolina, 1750-1805. by Peter N. Moore. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press
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The public's understanding of Scots-Irish backcountry settlement has been shaped more by family tradition and folklore than by scholarship. As a result, those of us who work in public history, often find ourselves face to face with visitors who's heads are filled with hundreds of *facts* that are more "truthy" than true. What this particular sub-genre of history has needed and really still needs is a closer examination of each geographic pocket of settlers, before we can redraw the popular syntheses that have so often been based on wishful thinking rather than documentation and analysis. Peter Moore's *World of Toil and Strife* offers us a glance at what that re-rendered depiction of the Scots-Irish backcountry might look like.

Moore examines the upcountry South Carolina area known as the Waxhaws, just south of Charlotte. He contends this Scots-Irish settlement was a completely yeoman community that transformed into a slave-holding staple producing community during the 1790's. "It is the purpose of this book," he says, "to chart and make sense of this important transformation." (p. 3) To do so, Moore first lays the foundation for understanding the settlement and early growth of the Waxhaws --- a movement that began in the early 1750's and continued unchanged until the mid years of the American Revolution. Living near kin and friends were as important to Scots-Irish settlers as the quality of the land they purchased. Family and friends improved settlers' chances of survival and success by offering "shared resources, companionship, trust, and protection." (p. 2) Protection was certainly needed in the Waxhaws during the 1750's. The community lived among the remnants of the Catawba and in the shadows of the Cherokee, who had by this time had all they could take of European westward expansion. But as Moore points out, the pressures that transformed the Waxhaws were internal not external.

From the beginning Scots-Irish settlers purchased slaves to help them with farm labor. But during that early period of settlement slaves were not isolated. In fact, as Moore points, ministers "baptized 150 slaves" between 1755-1757, "handed out bibles" and included "at least 60 slaves" in communion. (p. 40) The steep wooded hills and silicate laden red clay limited the proliferation of the institution of slavery in the Waxhaws, much as it did throughout the foothills of the Carolinas. In both areas slavery hovered around the 10 % mark until after the American Revolution. Approximately two-thirds of the enslaved population lived on yeoman farms in groups of two or three. This was not the world of the southern plantation, but that was about to change.

What were the causative agents that incited change? "Subtle changes in the local land market, growing population pressure, an expanding wheat market, and a deeper ...dependence on slave labor ... transformed the Waxhaws in the last decades of the nineteenth century." (p.76) Of these factors, overpopulation from "enthusiastic reproduction", and the explosion of wheat production due to "state of the art mills" in Camden, South Carolina and spiraling wheat prices, were perhaps the most significant. Population growth resulted in out-migration and the selling of inherited lands and went far to undermine the kin based neighborhood. The demand for wheat and the prices fetched for its successful milling promulgated larger farms and increased the demand for slave labor. Moore points out that by the turn of the century, "the Waxhaws were ... a slaveholding, staple-producing ... self-consciously southern community." (p.76) Were the Waxhaws unique?

The other pockets of Scots-Irish settlement throughout the South could bear comparison to Moore's efforts. How do the Waxhaws compare to the Shenandoah Valley or North Carolina Piedmont for example? The regional differences that result from that comparison will help us create a new and more nuanced understanding of Scots-Irish settlement, which will bridge the gap between the worlds of popular and scholarly history, and in the process provide public historians with case studies on which to base a new and more dynamic interpretation of this much misunderstood subject.

Tannenbaum Historic Park

BRENT BRACKETT

This brief but elegant book won the George C. Rogers, Jr., award given by the South Carolina Historical Society for the best book about South Carolina history published in 2007. Despite some formidable competition, that honor is richly deserved. Moore has consulted almost every conceivable source and extracted an amazing amount of information about a community known hitherto chiefly as the birthplace of President Andrew Jackson and the site of Banastre Tarleton's infamous slaughter of retreating Virginians during the American Revolution.

The story began with the Waxhaw Indians, who left their name on the area before they were nearly exterminated in the Yamassee War during the second decade of the eighteenth century. It then continued with Catawba whose hunting grounds spanned the lower Catawba River until smallpox decimated them in 1759; they "received" a twelve-mile square reservation on the boundary of North and South Carolina in 1764. In the meantime, Scots-Irish settlers, largely from Augusta County, Virginia, as well as Lancaster and Chester counties, Pennsylvania, moved into the rich bottom lands along the eastern side of the Catawba River, near the confluence of Waxhaw Creek. Partly because the Catawba Indians were still numerous and powerful enough to be a source of concern during the 1750s, the early immigrants—who for the most part settled among kin—formed a relatively compact community. Having come from wheat growing areas, they soon developed a prosperous local economy based largely on the production of wheat, and by the eve of the American Revolution perhaps as many as one thousand individuals lived in the area. Most men were yeoman farmers and devout Presbyterians. The settlement, however, was not as homogenous as this description might suggest, for it included another group of Scots-Irish immigrants who arrived directly from Ireland during the early 1770s. They too were Presbyterians but of a more conservative variety, and they arrived after the best lands had already been taken. Their grants were therefore generally to the poorer soils on the eastern side of the original settlement. Thus by the end of the colonial period there were ethnic, religious, and class divisions within the larger community.

Some of these fault lines opened up during and after the Revolution. Initially, most of the inhabitants were sympathetic to the American cause but averse to active military service. In fact, after the British captured Charles Town and troops arrived at the Waxhaws, local leaders sought and received assurances that they could remain neutral. However, the British commander in the

South, Lord Cornwallis, soon reversed this policy and demanded that young men join the Loyalist militia. This pressure, coupled with Tarleton's brutality and the burning of the nearby Presbyterian church at Fishing Creek on the western side of the Catawba River, apparently prompted a number of residents to take up arms for the American side. A few locals also became active Loyalists; interestingly enough, most of those who can be identified lived on the poorer eastern side of the region, and their average land holdings were less than half that of the most active Whigs.

Although—or perhaps because—local Loyalists were scarce, the war inflicted considerable damage on the community. In September 1780 Cornwallis and his army camped on Waxhaw Creek; he found plenty of food there but left considerably less. As a result, the winter of 1780 was a starving time. During the spring of 1781 Loyalists burned the local Presbyterian church. Later, the Americans established a British prisoner of war camp there. Many slaves apparently ran away; Loyalists fled or were killed and by the end of the war the area was a “burned-over district” (p.68). Nevertheless, the conflict left the social structure intact, and—most significantly--opened western lands to settlement, a development that was to have a profound impact on the Waxhaws.

Prosperity was slow to return after the war. Statewide-concerns involving a land boom, a crisis over the payment of debts, and a rage for internal improvements barely registered in this still-insular community. Estate inventories filed during the 1780s revealed a decrease in average livestock holdings and other measures of wealth. But by the 1790s a good wheat market, increasing use of credit locally, and more sales of inherited land characterized a reinvigorated economy. Meanwhile, associated demographic changes transformed the society. Before the war, slaves probably constituted no more than 12 percent of the population; by 1790 the figure was 90 percent and climbing as young whites left the area in large numbers, bound for the newly available lands to the west; or, as the author succinctly summarizes the situation, by this time the “social and economic system had produced a kind of critical mass, pricing itself out of the market and reproducing itself out of existence” (p. 88).

Religious life reflected some of the underlying social stress. Where to rebuild the church that has been burned during the war became a divisive question. The old church had been the center of the original community near the Catawba River, but the more recent immigrants who had settled farther east wanted the new church more conveniently located for them. The church was rebuilt without resolving the issue, but after it too burned in the early 1800s, the dispute widened fissures in the congregation. Meanwhile, choosing ministers and deciding whether to sing psalms (the more traditional practice) or hymns produced more factional disputes. The final wedge, however, appears to have been division over what to make of the Great Revival which came to the Waxhaws in the form of a huge camp meeting in May 1802 when some six thousand people gathered there for five days of interdenominational preaching and fellowship. Converts at such meetings—who were disproportionately young people—typically shouted, groaned, wept, and collapsed in ecstatic trances. Were these genuine religious experiences? Detractors thought not; the parents of the converts, Moore infers from the extant records of similar churches elsewhere, believed they were. The result, shortly after the great camp meeting, was a permanent split in the local church. “Thus what had been one of the largest and most respectable Presbyterian congregations in the state on the eve of the revival was by 1805 a church in decline. It was a church, moreover, embedded in a community in decline, as yeomen gave way to slaveholders, farms to great plantations, and wheat to green seed cotton” (p. 105).

By now, it should be clear that this is a well-wrought book, replete with ingenious use of sources, judicious inferences, and pithy writing. But in “this world of toil and strife”—to borrow the book’s title phrase (which comes from a hymn inscribed on a tombstone in the old Waxhaws churchyard)—perfection is a scarce commodity, and a reviewer can usually find things to quibble about in most books. The reduced number of cattle in the inventories of the 1780s, for example, may not be an especially good index by which to quantify the economic impact of the war, because provisioning armies probably disproportionately depleted local herds. At least Charles Stedman, who served as one of Cornwallis’s supply officers during the British march through the Carolinas, noted that feeding four thousand plus troops in Charlotte required the slaughter of about a hundred head a day, thirty-seven of which on one occasion were pregnant—an act which he believed only necessity could justify. One might also ask whether farmers in the Waxhaws experimented with tobacco before they turned to cotton. The soil in the eastern part of the settlement probably would have supported it, and as early as 1771 the state established a tobacco warehouse and inspection point fifty miles away in Camden.

Could answers to these and similar questions be discovered, they might provide useful detail but would doubtless have little effect on the author’s main concerns or most important interpretative contributions. Even his somewhat speculative attempts to estimate rates of tenancy and church adherence, like his kinship interpretation of local alignments over the Great Awakening, are interesting and thought-provoking. More important, his general depiction of the growth of this flourishing eighteenth century yeoman community and the beginnings of its subsequent transformation into a region of large plantations characteristic of the Old South is convincing. Wheat farmers, in short, began the process that cotton planters later completed.

Perhaps the only significant omissions in this book are systematic—or even tentative--comparisons with other communities such as the one in Augusta County, Virginia, from which so many of the Waxhaw residents came, or the South Carolina settlements at Ninety Six, which was ethnically similar, or the Welsh Neck, which was quite different. For only such a comparative approach will ultimately enable us to fully understand the development of the southern backcountry. But that is a job for many other books.

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