In November 1782, David Fanning (1755-1825), the last colonel of the Loyalist Militia of North Carolina, boarded a ship in the British evacuation of Charleston. Still young, he was famous for bold military strategy and notorious for brutal marauding. Appalled by his off-the-battlefield mayhem, the North Carolina Assembly in 1783 in its “Act of Pardon and Oblivion” excluded from pardon “Peter Mallette, David Fanning and Samuel Andrews, or any person or persons guilty of deliberate and wilful murder, robbery, rape, or house burning, or any of them.”¹ Thirty or forty years later, when North Carolinians began documenting Fanning’s cruelties, old men told stories about him, sometimes in aghast confidentiality. The educator Archibald D. Murphey (1777-1832), hearing that Fanning had an unpublished manuscript, enlisted the former congressman Archibald McBryde (1766-1837) to contact the old man in his Digby, Nova Scotia exile. Fanning in his mid-30s had indeed written a narrative, a dossier of his military service as a Loyalist and particularly of his physical sufferings and financial sacrifices in the service of the Crown. To use his term in letters to British Commissioners, his Narrative was an extended “Memorial” of service and losses for which he deserved reparations.² Three decades later, he understandably was unwilling to share his narrative with children of rebels. Nevertheless, on May 15, 1822 he held out a revealing possibility: “if any Gentleman wishes to know from me of any particular transaction or the Date, by pointing it out to me, I may give the Information of it.”³

Rebuffed, McBryde investigated on his own, and his heirs turned over notes to Eli W. Caruthers (1793-1865), the Guilford County Presbyterian minister who for years had sought out old people for their stories about the Revolution. At mid-century, several North Carolinians put on record what they knew about Fanning. David L. Swain (1801-1868), former governor of North Carolina, provided the Charleston doctor Joseph Johnson (1776-1862) with a section on Fanning for his 1851 book. In 1853 the North-Carolina University Magazine printed most of Swain’s


² Fanning, 97, 98, and elsewhere; in no way was his document a “confessions” or even a mere set of personal recollections. The Narrative of Colonel David Fanning, (New York: reprinted for Joseph Sabin, 1865), a reprint of the 1861 version, is found on-line at https://archive.org/details/toryintherevolu00fannrich.

account as a foreword to a longer narrative about Fanning in 1781-1782 “copied from the manuscripts of the late Archibald D. Murphey.” Then in his lengthy treatment of Fanning in his 1854 book Caruthers used others’ research along with what he had discovered.4

Caruthers printed what McBryde had learned from James Johnson, a nephew of the John O’Deniell who sheltered Fanning in his middle teens. Fanning’s former master had “treated him with great severity and neglect, making him live in the woods to take care of his cattle, and without comfortable food or clothing.” The lad arrived at the O’Deniell house “almost naked,” in dirty rags, and “had also the scald head, or tetter worm, which had been neglected, until it had taken the hair all off his head, except perhaps a very little low down about the neck, which had to be cut off; and the smell was so offensive that he never eat at the table with the family and never slept in a bed.” Mrs. O’Deniell healed the “tetter worm,” but his scalp was damaged.5 Corroboration of the disease is in the 1833 pension application of Andrew Harwell (S31104), who recalled that this “notorious Tory” was “sometimes called Bald head Fanning” and from Joseph Neeley (S31879), who in 1834 recalled his “pursuit of one Fannon scald headed Fannon as [he] was called.”6

Caruthers learned that young Fanning was “famous for his skill and dexterity in breaking or taming wild horses, which nobody else could manage. Stout of his a

Fanning was a bold horseman long before he left his wife safe in Charlestown and returned to North Carolina in search of the mare on which Andrew Hunter had escaped.8

Fanning’s Narrative was first printed in Richmond late in 1861 from a manuscript copy historian George Bancroft mailed John H. Wheeler on April 11 (the day before Confederates fired on Fort Sumter).9 Historians have taken the Narrative as reliable for Fanning’s 1775-1780 South Carolina adventures. It probably is, even for uncorroborated passages like Fanning’s encounter with Maj. Patrick Ferguson days before Kings Mountain.10 But

8 Fanning, 78-82. As Butler says in a footnote (79-80), Andrew Hunter’s escape on Fanning’s mare “is one of the best known incidents in the folklore of the Revolution.”

9 The Narrative of Colonel David Fanning (Richmond, VA: Printed for Private Distribution, 1861). This edition concluded where Fanning’s wife joins him in Charleston; see Butler’s “Introduction” to his 1981 edition, 16.

10 Fanning, 33. Caruthers thought that when Fanning went to South Carolina around 1775 he joined the Tory Daniel McGirth (146), perhaps confusing McGirth with Micajah Ganey. William C. Smith (S3924) puts McGirth and Fanning together in 1781 but the transcriber for the

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4 Joseph Johnson, Traditions and Reminiscences (Charleston, SC: Joseph Johnson, 1851), 569-573. Part of Murphey’s work that Swain sent to Johnson was restored to Murphey’s narrative in the 1853 article. Caruthers on his debts: 141-144.

5 Caruthers, 144. “Eat” means “ate,” probably pronounced “et.”


7 Caruthers, 145.
while events such as Col. Thomas Fletchall’s attempts to muster support for King George or the tarring and feathering of the Tory Lt. Col. Thomas Brown can be verified, Fanning’s involvement in them so far cannot. Accounts of Fanning’s being repeatedly betrayed by Whigs, imprisoned multiple times, being stripped naked, and stripped yet again and put in chains (and even kept naked in irons and chained to the floor for more than ten weeks, in 1778), all designed to impress the British Commissioners in Canada, are unverified and probably unverifiable.

Surprisingly, one South Carolina episode can be verified—and corrected! In June 1778, Fanning says, “Myself and one Samuel Smith now Associated and were Taken by a Company of Rebels Commanded by a Capt. Going, we made our escape the second night by Bribing the Centinel and parted Company. I met with one of the horses belonging To the Rebels about a mile from the house I had escaped from and mounted him[,] they pursued me through the woods by the horses tracks upwards of seventy miles and Came to Reburns Creek where I lived—they were anxious for to Recover their horse from me . . . .

In the rest of this story, yet again Whigs make promises to the guileless Fanning then betray him, recapturing him yet again and stripping him naked and imprisoning him. Again he escapes. Of this episode Lindley S. Butler says that Captain Going “cannot be identified.”

“Captain Going” was Captain John Gowen. Between February and August 1778 (which comprehends Fanning’s “June”), John Bearden S2991, Gowen’s brother-in-law and like him a Spartanburg District man, was in “a Company of Spys or Rangers under the command of Captain John Gowen, and was marched to a fort on the South fork of Packolett River and was frequently out Ranging and Spying on the frontier Settlements on Tigar river.” Bearden declared “that on one of the Scouting expeditions he was on, the Spies under Captain Gowen arrested and took prisoner two men one by the name of Fanning and the other by the name of Smith that they brought them back into the white Settlement and delivered them up to a Magistrate, as they were both tories, and both had a Stolen horse each taken from a M’. James Ford and a M’. John Patton.”

James Ford is apparently the Patriot son of the Loyalist Spartanburg planter of that name massacred by Indians in 1776. Later, in Montgomery County, Tennessee, Ford was perhaps “the most striking character in the county,” who “sat a horse perfectly, and in the saddle” was “the admiration of all the settlements.” Had Fanning stolen a prized horse from Ford, while Smith, the second named, had stolen the horse from Patton, who lived on South Tyger or the south side of Middle Tyger River?

Bearden remembered the horse thieves because he knew the local owners of the horses. Fanning’s innocuous tale omits the reason Gowen seized him. By 1861 no one was around to protest, “Fanning left out the main point!”

One silence is especially suspicious. In the South Carolina pages of the Narrative Fanning tells of being in skirmishes. Once he says that his side fired on Whigs but he is not sure whether any of

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*Southern Campaigns.* C. Leon Harris, points out that some of what Smith claims is “apparently pure fiction.”


12 Fanning, 26.

13 Will Graves supplied the name “David” before “Fanning” as he transcribed Bearden’s application; I quote from the slightly variant Fold 3, www.fold3.com Selflessly transcribing more than 20,000 applications, posting them on-line and making them freely searchable, Graves is strewing gold nuggets around for others like me to “discover.” See fn 5 above for web address.

them were injured. He never claims to have killed anyone in South Carolina. He returned to his birth state, North Carolina, in late 1780, according to the Narrative, and in 1781 and early 1782 there are military and political records and even newspapers articles to supplement his own unabashed account of his killings. In March 1, 1786 in his “Memorial” to Commissioners receiving claims “for losses and services” he emphasized that as a Colonel he “killed many of the rebels and took many of them prisoners.”

Using Murphey’s information, Gov. Swain said that in early 1781, in North Carolina, “clad in a long white hunting-shirt, and mounted on a common draft horse,” Fanning “was found at the head of a band of marauders, not more than eight or ten in number,” with no horse of his own. Caruthers echoes Swain, saying that Fanning had no horse “that was at all fit for the business” of sudden attacks on rebels and fast escapes. Given Fanning’s history, his riding on a common draft horse in 1781 seems suspicious. Were historians setting up a dramatic contrast between the unprepossessing early Fanning and Colonel Fanning the Redcoat, owner of a famous mare?

An aged informant, Isaac Farlow, helped the conscientious Caruthers recreate the “sequence of events” in which Fanning paid house calls on Balfour, Milliken, Collins, Collier, the Quaker Stephen Hurlin, Bryant, Dougan, and seized Daniel Clifton. Caruthers says that after deceptively luring Captain John Bryant out the door, Fanning shot him, when his wife was right behind him, and as she tried to lift her husband up one of Fanning’s men came up and shot him in the eye. Fanning gives the same sequence, except for omitting Stephen Harlin and his compelling Harlin’s two daughters to guide him to Captain John Bryant’s house.

But Caruthers far outdoes John Bearden in a detail omitted from the Narrative, one which gives a profoundly disturbing insight into Fanning just after he murdered Bryant: “As he probably felt a little wearied after so many labors, he lay down in the cradle, and after rocking himself there very comfortably for some time, while the rest were sauntering about, they all gathered up and went off in quest of other victims.”

Many stories about Fanning were probably all but unrepeatable in 1782 and 1783, when surviving victims would have been publicly identified and shamed. Caruthers believed the old gentleman who told him that, “horrid as it was, there was no doubt of the fact” that Fanning murdered a Whig’s wife. Right after his marriage, Fanning had seduced her “and, after keeping her for a short time,” he murdered her at their assignation place in the woods. (Fanning hid Hunter’s pregnant wife in the woods, as he did his own wife; he was at home there.) Caruthers knew that in 1800 Fanning had been convicted for raping a girl of fourteen or fifteen. My bet is that the North Carolina Assembly knew what it was doing in 1783.

While he made strategic omissions, Fanning did not invent documents. He “took the Kings proclamation and Distributed them through the country for upwards of 100 miles.” Fine: no historian would expect such a handbill to survive. He prints what may really be a unique “true Copy” of an “Advertisement” he caused “to be

19 Caruthers, 266-267.
20 Caruthers, 154-155.
21 In Fanning’s Narrative: Hunter’s wife, 79; Fanning’s wife, 77.
22 Fanning was sentenced to die in New Brunswick and when pardoned was exiled (again) to Nova Scotia (Butler in “Introduction,” 12). John Hairr in Colonel David Fanning: The Adventures of a Carolina Loyalist (Erwin, NC: Averasboro Press, 2000), 224-230, is sure Fanning was falsely accused and wrongly convicted. From what he learned from a Moore County man who had been in New Brunswick in 1823 and from others, Caruthers had much circumstantial detail for being sure Fanning raped the girl (284-293).
23 Fanning, 31.
published” recruiting Tories to serve in “the Royal North Carolina Regiment command[ed] by Lieutinant Coln Hamilton.” A surviving torn copy of Fanning’s September 25, 1781 “Rules and Regulations,” photographed in Butler’s edition, is basically what Fanning put into his manuscript. Fanning gives at some points a more accurate text of his February 26, 1782 letter to North Carolina Gov. Thomas Burke than that in the North-Carolina University Magazine in 1853. Printing Fanning’s letter of February 26, 1782 from the original, Lindley S. Butler says “that Fanning refined his journal as he wrote it”—but he did not falsify historical documents.

In the Savary addition to the Narrative Fanning describes a petition to “hold some foothold in the country” after the evacuation of Charlestown, keeping the “artillery, as they stood on the works.” He names 25 signers, starting with “Col. Ballingall” and including himself. On August 11, 1782 someone in Charleston wrote a letter printed in the Philadelphia Pennsylvania Packet for September 12, 1782: “I am just informed that a number of loyalists have petitioned general [Alexander] Leslie, to permit them to remain and defend the town with the tories and negroes: inclosed you have the principals.” Ballingall again headed the list of 25, which included Fanning. Three names appear only in the Packet and three only in the Narrative. Presumably Fanning carried away a list of petitioners, along with a copy of his February 26, 1782 letter to Burke and other documents. When Andrew Hunter rode off on Fanning’s mare did he leave behind documents in a saddlebag?

Fanning’s numbers and dates are unnaturally precise, and a man stripped naked and bound so many times simply could not have written and preserved any sort of diary. He recalls that “118” men signed a pledge to support the king, not “well over a hundred.” He was imprisoned on January 18, 1776, and released on May 10, 1776; he was captured on March 11, 1777, and escaped; from October 11, 1778 until December 20, 1778 he was “entirely naked,” thrown into irons and chained to the floor. In his March 1, 1786 petition to the Commissioners Fanning says he commanded four skirmishes in South Carolina and 36 in North Carolina. Fanning may have possessed a form of hyperthymesia, the condition in which one can recall the days of their lives in great detail, and recall events like battles which have personal significance to them. Might such a condition have developed during extreme isolation in childhood? Certainly Fanning’s tentative offer to verify dates for a sufficiently worthy inquirer signals an abnormally high confidence in his memory.

Autobiography is a genre which tempts writers to reveal their profoundest secrets. Recording his adventures as a way of documenting his losses and sufferings for which the Crown should compensate him, Fanning omitted anything that would distract the British commissioners. He also omitted anything he did not want known, such as Gowen’s seizing him as a horse thief. He omitted his rocking himself in a cradle while his men plundered Bryant’s house and while the widow mourned over Bryant’s warm, bloody, one-eyed body. Did he regularly leave out the “kicker” to his stories, the twist that makes it memorable? Fanning is famous among Revolutionary historians, but if he had not suppressed the most revealing parts of his stories might he be celebrated in Southern Gothic Literature classes today as a pioneering workaday Carolina counterpart of his contemporary, the Marquis de Sade?

25 Fanning, 7 (the photograph); 45-47.
26 Fanning, 106-108; North-Carolina University Magazine 2 (1853), 84-86.
27 Fanning, 105.
29 Fanning, 97.


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**SCAR Editor’s Request** – if you have or know where a pre-1861 copy of Fanning’s *Narrative* is housed, please let SCAR know. It seems with a widely-circulated version there should be a copy in a Canadian archive. Also, it would be great to have a copy of SC Loyalist militia Col. Robert Ballingall’s and other’s 1782 petition to British Gen. Alexander Leslie, the commandant of Charlestown, SC or to British North America Commander Sir Guy Carleton. If you have a copy of either, please share it with SCAR.

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Burches on PD [Pee Dee River] 9th June 1782

Sr

On my way to this Place I met Major [Joseph B.?] Lewis & Captns [Ananias] Gainey as a flag from Major [Micajah] Gainey to know my Intentions in marching this way & what terms I woud Grant them[..] I appointed the 3d Inst. to meet. Accordingly I sent Col. [Richard] Richardson [Jr.], Col. [John] Baxter & Major [John] James (Col. Horry was to be one but was taken sick on the road) to hold a Conference with Major Ganey & two of his Officers & give him my pro[po]sals, of Accomadation, after Confering with them & shew them the predicament they was In. They Appointed yesterday to give an Answer as I Desired they woud consult all their people & agree on the terms they cou’d not do it sooner. Accordingly I met Majors Gainey & Lewis, & Captns Lewis & Long. I found Great Difficult in coming on any terms, but by Granting the 8th Article as it now stands they Comply’d. My reasons for granting them that article, was I found there was some men who had Committed so many Enormities that my men woud kill them tho they had been pardon’d, & they ware so Attached to the British that they woud never Comply With any terms, consequently woud allways give us a Great deal of trouble to subdue them, with that of your recommendation not to shed Blood If it cou’d possible be avoided, which must have be done not only with that Set but all the rest in sertain Destruction, tho the task woud be Difficult to Effect & woud take more time than we cou’d spare, as they woud not face us but sculked in swamps untill I returned, when they woud come out & be worse than ever. These reasons I hope will be thought sufficient for Granting them such terms.²

Col² Fanning & a Major Andrews from North Carolina with thirty men Came to Gainey a few days before we concluded, & will now Indeavour to make his way to the British with his wife & 9 Negroes.³

The most who will not submit are Officers & a few privates.
Since I arrived here twenty men of the Lynches Creek Inhabitants who had been very troublesome has Come in & that part of the country will be Intirely Clear of the Disaffected, some others about thirty men on the upper part of Cheraws who Joined Gainey after the truce was made came in & submitted. There will be a few men on the North line who was not under controle of Either party will yet be troublesome but hope, to settle them in such a manner that will Leave that part of the District in peace for the future.  I have the Honor to be

Yrs Obv S

Fran’s Marion

RCS (Greene Papers: DLC), *Papers of General Nathanael Greene* XI:313-314 (Footnotes from same source with two omitted.)

2. Marion apparently referred to what became the ninth article in the printed version of the treaty. It read: “Such men who do not choose to accede to these articles, shall have leave to go within the British lines, and to march by the twenty-fifth instant, and be safely conducted with such of their wives and children who cannot be removed, may remain until the first day of September next. The officers to keep their pistols and side-arms; all other arms to be disposed of, and not carried with them. Each field-officer and captain to retain one horse, not exceeding twelve in the whole, and no other person to take with him any more horses that may be fit for dragoon service within the British lines.” (Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 2:420-421)

3. On Col. David Fanning’s departure from the truce lands, see Marion to Greene, 16 June, below. Maj. Samuel Andrews, who rode with Fanning, was one of three Loyalists specifically excluded from North Carolina’s Act of Pardon and Oblivion in 1783. Andrews made his way to Charleston and, after it was evacuated, settled first in East Florida and then Nova Scotia. (Fanning, *Narrative*, pp. 44-45n)

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“Soon after the Loyalists, That had got to Charlestown from different parts of the world hearing that the Southern Colonies were to be evacuated by the British forces, called a meeting to point out some measures to try to hold somefoothold in the country, until we got some part payment for our property which we were obliged to leave if we ever left the country. Hand bills were printed and stuck up throughout the town for the Loyalists to choose their representatives to represent our situation and the desire we had to support ourselves and property. It was proposed that 25 Gentlemen should be chosen a committee for that purpose. The day was appointed to take the vote. I was chosen amongst others; and drew up a petition and sent to Sir Guy Carleton, Commander in Chief; praying the liberty of keeping the town and artillery, as they then stood on the works; and despatched two gentlemen off with our petition; Our request was not granted. I have hereunto set forth the names of the gentlemen representatives:

Col° [Robert] Ballingall
Col° Robt. Wm. Powell
John Rose
Jas. Johnston, Esq.
Col° [Robert] Gray
Col. [Thomas] Pearson
Maj. Gabriel Capers
John Hopton, Esq.
John Champniss
Col° David Fanning
Wm. Carson
Col. Thomas Edgehill
Dr. Baron.”

This is on-line excerpted from the *NC State Records*, XXII:229-230

There is also some information on Fanning’s Loyalist Claim in the same place.