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Grace Ellen McCrann Memorial Lecture: “The Present Defenceless State of the Country”: Gunpowder Plots in Revolutionary South Carolina

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Grace Ellen McCrann Memorial Lecture

November 12, 10-1 at LaGuardia College

- I wrote an article entitled “The Present Defenceless State of the Country”: Gunpowder Plots in Revolutionary South Carolina for *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* which was published in October 2007. The following is a synopsis of my research.
- In South Carolina, the first year of the American Revolution was fraught with rumors concerning the military use of slaves and Indians by both sides against the other.
- Alongside fears of slave insurrections, many South Carolinians alleged that agents of the Crown and of the Revolution were covertly seeking Native allies by dispensing “presents” of scarce munitions.
- The preposterousness of the situation, of course, was that a highly feared population was to be kept well armed with a steady supply of firearms and ammunition for fear that the disruption of such a supply would mean certain attack from the said population.
- The city of Charleston was founded, in part, as a trading center where Indian tribes from the backcountry could come to deposit deerskins in return for European goods.
- While many European goods were acquired to enhance status of to make life easier, firearms and ammunition were critical to a tribe’s very survival in both warfare and on the hunt.
- Until the onset of the Seven Years War in 1756, South Carolina’s governor largely oversaw Indian affairs in the southern colonies and distributed presents as a primary means of influence and control.
- With inter-colonial conflicts increasing and France aggressively competing for influence among the tribes, the British Board of Trade and Plantations in 1754 decided it could no longer rely on colonial governors to distribute presents: North America would be divided into a northern and southern district with each overseen by a single superintendent.
- Colonial governors ignored this directive, putting them in conflict with the royal superintendents, including John Stuart, who was the southern superintendent from 1762 until his death in 1779.
- By the time of the Stamp Act in 1765 and its associated protests General Thomas Gage of the British army, stationed in New York, and the secretary for the colonies Lord George Germain, both agreed that giving presents to the Indians would be crucial in winning and maintaining them as allies in the impending conflict.
- On June 1, 1775, the Provincial Congress of South Carolina heard testimony that “a number of arms was sent over [by the British] to be distributed amongst the Negroes, Roman Catholics, and Indians.” The Provincial Congress sent a delegation to meet with the Creeks and Cherokee to offer them presents of gunpowder in ammunition in return for their loyalty.

- As scarce powder was sent to the Creek and Cherokee, both Loyalists and rebels living in the frontier interior complained that they had very little themselves and numerous seizures of stockpiles by both led to the first skirmishes of the war in South Carolina.
- The Creeks and Cherokee were disturbed by these seizures and warned South Carolina officials “if ammunition could be got soon things might remain quiet among them, but if they could not be supplied they could not answer for what their young people might do.”
- Tribes like the Cherokee were frustrated and somewhat baffled by the nascent revolution, “a Distemper among them which has seized the whole from Boston to Georgia, and they are now all mad.” By November 1775, with the winter approaching, the Cherokees were losing patience, complaining that “our Closest Brothers sent us several talks, they promised us Ammunition, and after we waited for Five moons, they tell us now, that we have none to get-They have told us nothing from the beginning but lies.
- By late July 1775 the royal government had begun discreetly advocating the use of Indians to suppress rebellious colonists. Superintendent Stuart was ordered by Gage to encourage the Indians to “take arms against his Majestys enemies, and to distress them all in their power for no terms is now to be kept with them...no time should be lost to distress a people who have acted so wantonly rebellious.”
- While Stuart’s distribution network went to work with admirable efficiency, the rebel legislatures of South Carolina and Georgia were slow to act, preferring to put what little munitions they had toward fighting the British army which was rumored to be planning an attack on Charleston in the spring of 1776.
- In May 1776 an American delegate met with the Cherokees and Creek, giving them copious amounts of rum and vague promises about munitions that were going to be delivered soon from France and Spain.
- The Royal Navy did attack Charleston on June 28, 1776, but were driven off by Americans stationed at Sullivan’s Island where the British cannonballs sunk into the palmetto log walls of the fort.
- Over the next two weeks, forces made up of Indians and Loyalists disguised as Indians attacked rebel positions in the backcountry, although there is no evidence of this being coordinated with the British attack on Charleston.
- Many Loyalists were outraged by the Indian attacks, and one revolutionary reported that “a number of the heads of the Tories in this province, when they heard of the breaking out of the Indians, wrote to our governor and told him they never dreamt the King would descend to such lawless and diabolical designs; that they were now willing to do everything in their power to assist their brethren in America.”
- Militias from Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia all converged on Cherokee settlements and burned several villages. Many Cherokee fled to John Stuart who had fled himself to the British colony of

West Florida. Attributing the war to Indian rashness, Stuart and the British did nothing to assist the beleaguered Cherokee, spurring Edmund Burke to thunder in Parliament that the Cherokees had been “bribed and betrayed into war” by British disingenuousness.

- In making peace with the Americans, the Cherokees ceded much of their lands in South Carolina, paving the way for still more backcountry settlements. With the resounding defeat of both the Royal Navy and the Cherokees, South Carolina would remain largely peaceful until the return of the British in 1780.