

## Highland Scots

*Modified from "The Highland Scots" by Kathryn Beach (Tar Heel Junior Historian, Spring 2006)*

Highlanders are descendants of people who settled in the northern mainland and islands of Scotland, which is part of Great Britain. The Highland Scots are unique because of the way they moved in large, organized groups from their homeland to the North Carolina colony.

The Highlands have many mountains and very cold winters. In the 1700s, it was a poor region. Highlanders had a tribal clan system. The clan chief—who was related by blood to clan members—provided land for members to farm. They, in turn, gave him obedience, military service, and paid rent.

Scotland experienced changes in the mid-1700s that resulted in thousands of Highlanders moving to the American colonies. In 1745, there was a revolution. Many Highland clans supported Prince Charles in his attempt to take the English throne from King George II. The Highland army was defeated in 1746 by Scottish and English forces.

After their defeat, the English punished the Highlanders. They took the Highlanders' weapons away and took power away from their clan chiefs. They required all schools to teach in English, rather than the Highlanders' native Gaelic language.

Other forces contributed to emigration. The population of Scotland had increased, thanks to the new smallpox vaccine and roads that allowed for easier transport of food. There were also improvements in farming methods. The metal plow was introduced. People began to use land for sheep herding instead of farming, too. These changes meant that many Highlanders were left without any land.

The first organized group of Highlanders came to North Carolina in 1739. 350 people from Argyllshire journeyed to Wilmington and up the Cape Fear River to settle in what became Cumberland County. The new arrivals wrote letters back to Scotland encouraging further immigration. Alexander McAllister wrote to relatives urging them, "to take [courage] and [come] to this country it will be of [benefit] to the rising generation."

Others did follow. By 1775 thousands of Highlanders had come to the colony. British officials interviewed departing Highlanders in 1773 about their reasons for leaving Scotland. Laborers stated that they hoped for better employment in North Carolina. Tradesmen expected better business. Farmers cited high rents and oppressive landlords as their reasons for moving to the Americas. The hope for a better future was a major force behind immigration 230 years ago and remains so today.

Highlanders were encouraged to settle in colonial North Carolina by royal governor Gabriel Johnston. Johnston was a native Lowland Scot himself. He was the colony's governor from 1734 until 1752. Johnston gave the new Scottish immigrants a ten-year exemption on paying public or county taxes, meaning they would not have to pay those taxes during their first ten years in North

Carolina. Most Scots coming to the colony were farmers who needed land, so this tax exemption offered a strong incentive.

When the Highlanders arrived, their priorities were to find land and plant a crop. The native longleaf pines allowed crops to be planted without the hard work of first removing all trees. Settlers removed a ring of bark from the pines, which killed the trees. This caused the trees' needles to fall and allowed sunlight to reach crops.

The Scottish Highlanders had many adjustments to make in their new home. North Carolina was an English colony. English was the language used by many settlers and the only language used by the government and the courts. Highlanders spoke Gaelic. There were also religious differences. The Highlanders were Presbyterian. Because North Carolina was a royal colony, its official religion was Anglican, or Church of England. Marriages by Presbyterian ministers were not considered legal.

The Highlands are a cold, rocky land where many areas have no trees. New immigrants had to adapt to a very warm climate with swamps and forests. Scottish homes were made of stone. Most early North Carolina homes were made of wood. The thin soil and short growing season of the Highlands made oats and barley the main crops. In their new home, Scots grew corn and wheat and raised hogs rather than cattle. They also produced naval stores—pitch and tar rendered from the sap of pine trees and used in the construction of wooden ships.

Despite differences in language, religion, and traditions, the Highland Scots adapted to North Carolina society. They were involved in the government. When the colonial assembly called for a Revolutionary Congress to meet in 1774, two Highlanders represented Cumberland County. One representative, Alexander McAllister, wrote to relatives in Scotland that “All colonies [are] fully determined to fight to the last before they give up their most valuable privilege which is their liberty. If Parliament persists in putting the acts [Intolerable Acts] in force, they will have a severe battle.”

The war divided neighbors into Patriots and Loyalists, and so it did with the Highlanders. Many Highlanders joined the Loyalist cause. Some, like McAllister, were Patriots. For many, the Revolution was spent just trying to survive the demands and actions of both groups. During and after the war, some Highlanders left to settle in Canada and Bermuda or to return to Great Britain. Many stayed to become Americans. After stopping during the Revolution, Highland immigration to North Carolina began again after the war ended.

The Scottish presence continues to be felt in the Cape Fear region and across the state. It can be seen in the influence of the Presbyterian Church; the number of North Carolinians who carry with Scottish names and ancestry; and the counties, towns, and even streets with Scottish names.