

Taylor Family Association Perspective  
Lewellen's Conspiracy  
Mark J Taylor, July 2022

A synopsis/review of McConville, Brendan, The Brethren: A Story of Faith and Conspiracy in Revolutionary America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021) 277 Pages.

## Introduction

On 5 July 1777 the North Carolina governor received a message that “a ‘traitorous Conspiracy’ of loyalists had formed in the Albemarle Sound region and perhaps had already spread to every county in the state. These plotters intended to ‘assassinate all the leading men’ in North Carolina’s revolutionary government—including the governor himself.”

Governor Caswell “immediately moved to crush these rebels against a republican future. Militia units loyal to the state arrested dozens of conspirators, snuffing out the planned coup just before blood was to be shed. This would-be uprising quickly came to be known as the Gourd Patch, or Lewellen Conspiracy, the former name referencing the rallying place of the plotters, the latter taken from the conspiracy’s purported leader, Martin County militia captain and justice of the peace John Lewellen.” (McConville, p. 1-2.)

The conspiracy was focused among the yeoman planters of Martin, Tyrrell, and Bertie counties. The government authorities referred to the participants as the Association, and the participants referred to themselves as the Brethren. The motivations discussed by McConville primarily concern religious loyalties, but also perceived overbearing actions of the revolutionist government.

“Late in 1776 or early in 1777, Martin County freeholders John Lewellen, John Carter, James Sherrard, James Hayes..., and James Rawlings, who were joined early on by Bertie County yeoman Daniel Legate, began to tell family and friends the unsettling stories about heretics, the efforts to bring the French into the war, the forced drafts, and recounted the events that suggested a popish plot.

...

Even a superficial survey reveals the role of kinship in the movement. . . . The Taylor family contributed three members....” (McConville, p. 107).

For the Joseph Taylor Family Association, some relevant matters in the book are the role played by David Taylor, his brother Joseph Taylor, and the other friends and relatives involved in the conspiracy. When the matter was being investigated, and when witnesses were interviewed in preparation for Lewellen’s trial for high treason, a significant number of depositions, or witness statements were written down. As a result the author has studied and digested the depositions and uncovered many facts about our family, their relatives, and their neighbors, as well as the nature of their lives during the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

One of the interesting things about the story is that David Taylor, and his brother Joseph Taylor learned of the planning, and participated in the discussions, but were not comfortable with the violence and reported to governmental officials.

### **Key references to family and friends:**

David Taylor:

p. 75 “On July 5, 1776 the Albemarle yeomanry still saw the French as a deadly threat. Nathan Hallaway testified that when he was recruited into the movement to defend Protestantism in North Carolina, John Carter told him, among other things, ‘that the French was coming in that the gentry was joining them to bring in the Popish religion.’ This created fear in Hallaway and other Albemarle yeomen.

Lay preacher James Rawlings shared with David Taylor and others his fears about the new government and the French. (Deposition of David Taylor, June 4, 1777. p. 238, n. 18)”

p. 133 “When James Rawlings brought David Taylor into the movement in late May,” he reported the arguments he made.

p. 142-43 “In June 1777 [Lewellen] told James Rawlings that he believed the associators should ‘git some Body to disaffect the Negroes.’ ... Lewellen fixated on David Taylor to play this role for a good, if ironic, reason. Taylor served as a ‘Patroler over the Negroes in that Neighborhood,’ a member of the expanded slave patrol. Taylor could move around the servile population without raising questions. He would claim to carry a message from the benevolent King liberating the slaves, and would be credible when he would appear at Halifax to ‘give out an oration of the [slaves] Rising’ in order to draw the soldiers away from the village. Then Lewellen and the others would seize the armaments magazine at Halifax and assassinate Governor Caswell.” The Governor wasn’t there and it didn’t happen.

“The specter of a white-inspired slave uprising accelerated the movement’s internal unraveling. Slave patroller David Taylor could not bring himself to be involved in a servile revolt and was one of the first to give evidence against the Brethren’s leaders. Early in June, Taylor told his brother about Lewellen’s plans, including the diversionary slave rebellion. Seeing the potential for his sibling to end up on the gallows, this brother convinced Taylor to go to the authorities. They revealed what they knew and learned that officials had already heard rumors about a plot against the state.”

Richard Taylor Sr.

p. 108 “Neighbors stood with neighbors. Witnesses described early associator Richard Taylor Sr. as ‘a near neighbor to Capt. Lewelling.’ ... Deeds from Martin County suggest that many involved in the movement lived in proximity to one another in what became District 1 and District 5 in that county.” [See 1790 Census]

Joseph Taylor

p. 238, n.18 “Joseph Taylor swore ‘if the popish Religion was brought into the land that they were to take up arms to oppose them that brought it.’”

John Lewellen

p. 24 Around 1760 he moved from Norfolk Co, Virginia to the south Albermarle, approx. 40-45 age. In Virginia he owned farm land and was a shipwright. Bought hundreds of acres north side of Conetoe Swamp, Martin County.

Thomas Best

p. 133 Thomas Best stated that Isaac Barbree wanted to shoot James Mayo, the same as Lewellen did. Best thought several others were hostile to Mayo, including David Taylor and Hardy Counsell

p. 170 “The evidence against John Lewellen was overwhelming. One after another, men related to the Brethren’s leader by blood or marriage, as well as those who he had long known or helped to recruit into the movement gave evidence. John Carter, Henry Culpepper, William Wallace, James Council, and Thomas Best mounted the stand and bore witness against him.

John Hodges

p. 121 “The oaths became a central part of a recruitment rite that emerged in April 1777. John Hodges agreed to associate after warden and lay preacher James Rawlings ‘offered him a Secret.’” Gave him a book and had him swear an oath on the Bible.

William or Joseph Taylor

p.132 Lewellen and Rawlings discussed killing the revolutionary leaders in the state, including William and Joseph Taylor, who were on the Hillsborough committee of safety.