

## The Llewellyn Conspiracy: North Carolina, 1777

The year 1775 started in North Carolina with a loyalist government still in place. However, North Carolina and other colonies were forming Committees of Safety to seize power from loyalist institutions. On April 4, 1775, The Provincial Congress of North Carolina empowered a Council of Safety to exercise powers in support of the Continental Congress's efforts to ban trade with Britain. This included creation of Courts of Admiralty at the port cities, and plenary powers for the Council to "do and execute all acts and things necessary for the defence [sic] and protection of thew people of this Colony..." with some restraints. Two men were chosen to function on the Council for each district. Two were appointed for Edenton District, and two for Halifax District. The property along Coneighta ("Conetoe") Creek was near or adjacent to the border between the Halifax District and the Edenton District of North Carolina. Among the four members of Council in this area, Whitmell Hill for Edenton District is the member playing a part in the events below.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the actions taken, the Royal Governor Josiah Martin dissolved the assembly and fled to the coast, where he reached the British warship Cruizer.

The years 1776 and 1777 continued with divisive politics throughout the colonies, including those along Conetoe Creek in Martin and Edgecombe counties. In July 1776 The Declaration of Independence was adopted and signed by North Carolina's representatives to the Continental Congress: Joseph Hewes, William Hooper, and John Penn. As the idea of independence from Great Britain grew, North Carolina's Fifth Provincial Congress met in December of 1776 and created a Constitution compatible with the efforts of independence. Relevant to this account, Article XXXIV of The Constitution disestablished the Anglican Church, which meant that the Anglican Church was no longer the official Church, and it would no longer receive public funds for maintenance of the ministerial officers nor for the properties.<sup>2</sup> Another controversial action was Article XXXII, which

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<sup>1</sup> "The Committees of Safety." Revolutionary North Carolina. ANCHOR.

<https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/committees-safety>; and Journal of the proceedings of the Provincial Congress of North Carolina, held at Halifax on the fourth day of April 1776, p. 58,59;

<sup>2</sup> J.V. Orth and W.S. Powell, *Constitution, State, Encyclopedia of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006)

[https://www.ncpedia.org/government/nc-constitution-](https://www.ncpedia.org/government/nc-constitution-history#:~:text=In%20December%201776%20North%20Carolina's,onqoinq%20struggle%20for%20American%20ind)

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[pendence](https://www.ncpedia.org/government/nc-constitution-history#:~:text=In%20December%201776%20North%20Carolina's,onqoinq%20struggle%20for%20American%20ind); and Crow, Jeffrey J. "Tory Plots and Anglican Loyalty: The Llewellyn Conspiracy of 1777." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 55, no. 1 (1978): 1–17, 6.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23535379>.

prohibited a person from holding office if they denied the existence of God or the truth of Protestantism; and the creation of a mandatory oath of allegiance together with a draft for able bodied men between 16 and 50 years of age.

Martin County had an outspoken critic of the new Constitution's provisions and the actions of the Council of Safety. John Lewelling, a Tory partisan / loyalist, was planter of substantial means from Martin County. He had lands along Conetoe Creek. He acquired lands on numerous occasions, including 100 acres in 1765, and 390 acres in 1772; the 1790 Census recorded 20 slaves at his property; and he was named a justice of the peace at the Halifax congress in 1776.<sup>3</sup> On the 1790 Census, he is listed on page 435 immediately next to Thomas Taylor, and closely followed by William Wallace, Richard Taylor, several Crisps, a few Mayos, William Manning, Thomas Best, Charles Council, John Council, John Taylor Jun., John Taylor, Joseph Taylor, David Taylor, another John Taylor, and Richard Taylor. That is a Who's Who of our Joseph Taylor's friends and family.<sup>4</sup>

During late 1776 and early 1777 Llewellyn became agitated at the actions of the new government, in large part due to the disestablishment of the Anglican Church, and the promotion of French and Catholic interests. The dissenters were also concerned about changes in trading partners, and the disruption to their imports and exports. There may not have been great risk of Catholicism getting a stronghold in North Carolina, but the Whigs and the Loyalists certainly had different views on Church / State relations, and there were several leaders of a pro-Catholic movement among the Whigs. Lewelling organized a Loyalist campaign to oppose the Whigs, consisting of a secret society with a position paper and a version of an acceptable constitution. The paper setting out his Loyalist point of view was circulated by his son William Lewelling through the counties close at hand: Martin, Edgecombe, Halifax, Bertie, and Tyrel. James Rawlins, a lay Anglican preacher from Hyde county, assisted with the drafting and recruited at

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<sup>3</sup> John Lewelling, also referred to as Llewellyn, was the son of William and Frances Lewelling from the western branch of the Elizabeth River in Norfolk County, Virginia. It is estimated that he was born in 1715, and he died in Edgecombe County, North Carolina in 1794. His will was made on October 2, 1793, and he was said to have lived to be 80. His mother Frances in the Conetoe area for approximately 8 years before her death there. Her will probated in January 1775, and one of the executors of her estate was William Manning. Another possible connection: George Washington Wallace (1780-1831), son of William D Wallace (1754-1825), married Elizabeth Llewellyn. <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/lewelling-john>; and George Washington Wallace at <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KNXR-HLF>.

<sup>4</sup> Crow, "Tory Plots," p. 4; and 1790 United States Federal Census, pp. 435, 436. [https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/5058/images/4440913\\_00256?pid=179214](https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/5058/images/4440913_00256?pid=179214).

religious services. One of Lewelling's opponents was Whitmel Hill of Martin County. Hill served on the legislative committee which drafted the Constitution and other documents Llewelyn opposed.<sup>5</sup> He was also the Martin County representative on the Council of Safety, and was apparently the largest plantation operator in the county.

The conspiracy grew, attracting concerned Anglicans and others antagonistic to the independence movement. An historian with access to witness depositions from a later court case reported the following plans of rebellion:

“The loyalists also laid plans to take ‘possession of the Magazine at Hallifax to secure the Arm’s and Ammunition....’ When Sir William Howe, commander of the British forces in America, marched south as the Tories expected, ‘there would be a ‘World of Bloodshed’ for which they must be prepared. But through their society Howe would know ‘his friends from his foes.’

Just to be safe, however, Llewelyn, Rawlins, and several others made preparations to reach ‘General Howe’ and secure a ‘Commission in order to enlist men for Support of the present King of England.’ They approached wealthy loyalists to finance the expedition. With high hopes presumably, Llewelyn set out for New York and General Howe. Llewelyn’s ambitious journey, however, got only as far as Scotland Neck, North Carolina, before he became discouraged and turned back.”<sup>6</sup>

The failed plan was followed with another idea relying on one of the Martin County Taylors. James Rawlins explained this plan:

“...a Certain David Taylor, a patroller over the Negroes...Shou[l]d Disaffect the minds of the negroes & Cause them to run away, under the name of a Rising & Draw the Soldiers out of Halifax in pursuit of them, whilst ... Llewelling herded numbers of his Society as they termed themselves To take the magazine & Governor...”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Crow, “Tory Plots,” p 6. Hill still resided in Martin county in 1787, and 1790 as reflected in the State Census and the National Census. In both years he had the most slaves in the county: in 1787, 162; in 1790, 140.

<sup>6</sup> Crow, “Tory Plots,” pp. 9-10. The author relied on the official depositions of Thomas Harrison, Sr. of Tyrrell County, Thomas Stubbs of Tyrrell County, James Harrison of Tyrrell County, James Rawlins of Hyde County, and Thomas Best of Martin County.

<sup>7</sup> Deposition of James Rawlins, Hyde County, August 6, 1777, as cited in Crow, “Tory Plots,” p. 10.

Since the Governor was not present in Halifax, this scheme never came to fruition. Llewelyn's other schemes failed as well. A group of loyalists attempted to take Tarboro, but they were defeated by Col. Henry Irwin's forces in July 1777. A few days before the attempt on Tarboro, the conspiracy began to unravel, likely due to David Taylor and Joseph Taylor coming forward to the authorities. Jeffrey Crow reports from the depositions that "David Taylor, the patroller who was assigned to incite the slave insurrection, had gotten cold feet and revealed the conspiracy to whig authorities – it was he and a relative who were the first to give depositions on June 4, 1777."<sup>8</sup>

Many were arrested, depositions were taken, people recanted and took the loyalty oath, but few were actually charged for offence. However, on or about 1 August 1776, Llewelyn was charged with the high crime of treason, and on September 16, 1777, was convicted and sentenced to be hung by the Court of oyer and terminer in Edenton, Chowan County. He was in jail for a period, but the Judge, the Governor and key legislators were sympathetic, and the death sentence was never executed.<sup>9</sup>

The Governor pardoned Llewelyn, and on March 11, 1778, he received a state grant for 619 acres on the north side of Conetoe Creek, along the Tearful Branch. He was apparently a successful planter. He made his will on October 2, 1793, and it was probated in 1794. When he died, the county lines had changed and he was in Edgecombe County.<sup>10</sup>

Joseph Taylor, Jr. missed all of this excitement, as he enlisted in the North Carolina Fifth Regiment on or about 1 August 1776, served Blount's Company, and was discharged on 30 January 1779.

In addition to the article referenced here by Jeffrey Crow, and the sources he cited in his footnotes, there is a new book recently published concerning this conspiracy: Brendan McConville, The Brethren: A Story of Faith and Conspiracy in Revolutionary America (Harvard University Press, 2021). I have ordered a copy.

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<sup>8</sup> Crow, "Tory Plots," p. 11. Crow relied on the depositions of William Wallace, William May, David Taylor, and Joseph Taylor.

<sup>9</sup> Crow, "Tort Plots," pp. 13-15.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/lewelling-john>.