

From Scotland to the Carolinas:

The Scots-Irish Road to the Carolina Piedmont

A Five-Part Historical Series

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Part One

From Scotland to Ulster to the Carolina Piedmont:

How a King's Ambition Sent Our Ancestors on the Road to the Carolinas

If you grew up in the Carolina Piedmont or the mountains to our west, there is a good chance your family roots run through Scots-Irish soil. The names are still here — the McDowells, the Campbells, the Caldwells, the Kerrs, the Alexanders, the Wilsons. The Presbyterian churches they built are still here. The independent, plain-spoken, don't-tread-on-me spirit they carried with them is still here, woven so deeply into the character of this region that most of us barely notice it anymore. We absorbed it the way we absorbed the air.

But our ancestors did not come straight here. Their journey to the Carolina Piedmont was the last leg of a migration that had already crossed one ocean and uprooted itself more than once. At this point in the story, they were not yet in America. They were not yet in Ireland. They were still in Scotland, living hard lives in a hard land, with no idea that a king's political calculations were about to put them on a road that would eventually lead to this corner of the world. To understand who we are and where we came from, we have to go back to that starting point — back to a small island off the northwest coast of Europe, and to a king who had problems he needed to solve.

A Small Island, Deeply Divided

Ireland is not a large place. The entire island — north to south, east to west — is roughly the size of the state of Indiana. But within that modest geography, the Irish had long organized themselves into four distinct provinces, each with its own history, character, and identity. Those four provinces were Ulster in the north, Leinster in the east, Munster in the south, and Connacht in the west.

Think of the provinces the way Americans think of broad regions — the way New England feels different from the Deep South, or the way the Mountain West has its own personality apart from the Gulf Coast. Ireland's provinces were not separate countries and did not have their own governments in the modern sense, but they were deeply distinct from one another in culture, in clan loyalty, and in their relationship with the English crown, which had been trying to assert control over Ireland for centuries with mixed and often violent results.

Of the four provinces, Ulster was the most stubbornly independent. Occupying the northern quarter of the island — an area not much larger than the state of Connecticut — Ulster was the last stronghold of Gaelic Irish culture and the last to resist English authority. Its terrain was rugged, its clan leaders were powerful, and its people had no interest in bending to a Protestant English king. For the English crown, Ulster was the problem that never quite went away. It was also, as it turned out, the province that would become home to the people whose descendants now populate much of this region.

The King with Two Crowns

To understand what happened next, you need to know something about the man who set it all in motion. The people who would eventually make their way to the Carolina Piedmont were not yet players in this story — but the decisions this one man made would determine everything about where they ended up.

James was born in Scotland in 1566 and became King of Scotland — as James VI — when he was barely a year old, after his mother Mary Queen of Scots was forced from her throne. He grew up navigating the treacherous politics of the Scottish nobility, learning early that survival required cunning as much as authority.

In 1603, when Queen Elizabeth I of England died without an heir, James inherited the English crown as well, becoming James I of England while remaining James VI of Scotland. He was now king of both nations — though they stayed separate kingdoms with separate governments. He was the first monarch to rule both at the same time, and he spent much of his reign managing the complications that came with that arrangement.

James was a Protestant king ruling over kingdoms with deep religious fault lines. In Ireland, the native population was overwhelmingly Catholic and had resisted English Protestant rule for generations. In Scotland, he had his own stubborn problem — a volatile strip of territory along the border between Scotland and England that had been a source of disorder and violence for as long as anyone could remember. James had

inherited both of these headaches, and he was shrewd enough to see that one bold move might address both of them at the same time.

The Door Opens: The Flight of the Earls

The opportunity James needed came from Ireland itself, in 1607. The two most powerful Gaelic lords in Ulster — Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, and Rory O'Donnell, the Earl of Tyrconnell — had spent years leading Irish resistance against English rule. They had fought the English to a near standstill in a long conflict known as the Nine Years' War, which finally ended in 1603 with an English victory. The two earls submitted, but the submission was bitter and humiliating, and life under English authority was intolerable to men who had once commanded the north of Ireland as their own domain.

In September of 1607, O'Neill, O'Donnell, and nearly a hundred members of the Gaelic Ulster nobility boarded a ship and sailed for Catholic Europe, never to return. This became known as the Flight of the Earls, and it was one of the most consequential moments in Irish history. Under English law, their departure was treated as abandonment and treason. Their lands — six counties covering most of Ulster — were declared forfeit to the crown.

James now had roughly three and a half million acres of the most resistant territory in Ireland sitting empty and available. It was the opening he had been waiting for. And what he decided to do with it would set in motion a chain of events that, a century later, would bring our ancestors to American shores.

The Plan: Planting Ulster

What James launched in 1610 was called the Plantation of Ulster — a deliberate, organized effort to replace the Gaelic Irish population of Ulster with loyal Protestant settlers from Britain. The idea was not subtle. If you could not subdue the Irish of Ulster by force, you could dilute them by settlement, surrounding them with people who owed their land and their loyalty directly to the English crown.

The plantation was carefully structured. The confiscated lands were divided into large grants and distributed to three categories of recipients.

The first and most favored group was called the Undertakers. These were men of rank — Scottish and English — who received grants of between one thousand and two thousand acres each. The name came from what they undertook, or promised, to do with the land: settle it exclusively with Protestant tenants from Britain, build defensible structures, and hold the territory for the crown. No Irish tenants were permitted on their portions. The Undertakers were the backbone of the plantation.

The second group was called the Servitors. These were military men and government officials who had served the crown in Ireland. They received similar grants but were given somewhat more flexibility, including the ability to rent to Irish tenants if necessary.

The third group was a small number of native Irish who received modest grants of a hundred to two hundred acres — a token gesture, largely intended to avoid completely

alienating every Irish voice in the region.

Lowlanders and Borderers: Know the Difference

Of all the decisions James made in designing the plantation, the choice to rely so heavily on Scottish settlers was the most deliberate — and the most consequential for our part of the world. But to understand why these particular Scots were so well suited for what James had in mind, you need to understand something about Scotland's own internal geography, because not all Scots were alike, and the ones who came to Ulster were a very specific breed.

Scotland is divided into two very different worlds. The Highlands occupy the northern and western part of the country — mountainous, rugged, Gaelic-speaking, and organized around a clan system that was ancient even by seventeenth century standards. Highland Scots are what most Americans picture when they think of Scotland — kilts, bagpipes, fierce loyalty to the clan chief.

The Lowlands are something else entirely. The southern and central portion of Scotland — flatter, more fertile, more connected to the wider world of trade and commerce — was home to a different kind of Scot altogether. Lowlanders spoke a form of English rather than Gaelic, tended toward Calvinist Presbyterianism in their religion, and had more in common culturally with northern England than with their Highland countrymen to the north. It was Lowland Scots, not Highlanders, who made up the great majority of the settlers who crossed to Ulster.

But within the Lowlands, there was one region that stood apart even from the rest — the Scottish Borders. This was the strip of territory running along the line where Scotland meets England, and it had been one of the most violent and lawless stretches of land in all of Britain for centuries. Caught between two kingdoms that were frequently at war with each other, the families who lived in the Borders — on both the Scottish and English sides of that line — had developed a culture built around survival. They lived by the raid. Cross-border plundering was not considered criminal — it was simply how things worked. Loyalty ran to the family and the clan, not to any distant king. These people were known as the Border Reivers, from an old word meaning to plunder or rob, and they were feared throughout both kingdoms for their ferocity and their refusal to be governed.

The simplest way to understand the distinction is this: all Borderers were Lowlanders, but not all Lowlanders were Borderers. The Borderers were a particular breed even within the Lowlands — harder, more mobile, more experienced with violence and displacement, and considerably less interested in being told what to do. Many of the Scots-Irish families whose names are still scattered across the Carolina Piedmont and mountains today trace their roots not just to Scotland generally, or even to the Lowlands broadly, but to this specific Border culture. That stubborn, independent, take-no-orders character that we still recognize in this part of the world did not appear out of nowhere. It was bred into these people over centuries of surviving on a contested frontier.

Why These Scots?

Sending Border families to Ulster solved two problems simultaneously for James. It planted tough, experienced, fiercely Protestant settlers in the most dangerous province of Ireland — people who could hold the territory and would not be intimidated by their Gaelic neighbors, because they had never been intimidated by anyone. And it cleared the troublesome Border clans out of Scotland, reducing the chronic instability that had plagued that region for generations. One policy, two problems solved. James was nothing if not efficient.

The Scots who crossed the narrow channel between southwest Scotland and northeast Ulster — a stretch of water only about twelve miles wide at its narrowest point — brought with them their Presbyterian faith, their clannish loyalties, their fierce independence, and their long experience with hardship and displacement. They were not strangers to being uprooted. They were not strangers to starting over in a difficult place. In a very real sense, moving to Ulster was not so different from what their families had been doing for generations along the Border — moving, settling, defending, surviving.

They put down roots in Ulster and for a generation or two it looked like they had finally found the stability they had been searching for. They built farms. They built churches. They raised families. The names that would later show up on land grants and church rolls and militia rosters across the Carolina Piedmont began to take shape in Ulster soil.

But stability, for these people, had a way of being temporary. The same pressures that had always found them — economic hardship, religious discrimination, the sense that the ground beneath them was never quite as solid as it appeared — would find them again in Ulster. And when it did, they would do what they had always done.

They would move.

That is the story of the next chapter — what went wrong in Ulster, and what finally put our ancestors on a ship bound for a new world, and eventually, on the road that brought them here.

Part Two

Before the Ships Sailed:

Why Our Ancestors Left Ulster and What Finally Pushed Them Out the Door

When the Scottish settlers first crossed the narrow channel from the Scottish Lowlands and the Borders into Ulster in the early 1600s, they had every reason to believe they had finally found what they were looking for. The land was available. The leases were

long — typically thirty-one years, sometimes longer. The rents were low, deliberately kept that way to encourage settlement. For people who had spent generations scratching out a living on contested ground, Ulster must have felt like a genuine fresh start.

And for a while, it was. Through much of the seventeenth century, Ulster prospered. The settlers cleared land, built farms, established Presbyterian congregations, and created communities that felt, for the first time in their experience, reasonably stable. The linen industry took hold and provided an economic foundation beyond farming alone. Towns grew. Churches filled. Children were born who had never known Scotland and knew Ulster as home.

But stability, for these people, had always been temporary. And the forces that would eventually drive our ancestors out of Ulster were already quietly gathering, even in the good years.

The Ground Shifts: Economic Pressure

The first and most persistent source of trouble was economic, and it grew directly out of the same lease system that had originally attracted settlers to Ulster in the first place.

Those long leases — thirty-one years was typical — had encouraged tenant farmers to pour their labor and their savings into improving their land. They drained fields, cleared timber, built structures, and made their holdings more productive year by year. The problem was that every improvement they made increased the value of the land, and when the lease came up for renewal the landlord — who in most cases was an absentee living comfortably in England and had never set foot on the property — could demand a dramatically higher rent. This practice was called rack-renting, and it was perfectly legal. The landlord simply offered the renewed lease to whoever would pay the most for it, which was often not the family that had spent a generation building the place up.

The tenant farmer faced a brutal choice. Pay the new rent, which might be double or triple what he had been paying, and watch whatever modest prosperity he had built slowly drain away. Or refuse, lose the land entirely, and start over somewhere else — if there was somewhere else to go.

By the late 1600s the original leases were beginning to expire across Ulster, and the rack-renting began in earnest. Letters written by emigrants themselves, collected at the time by people trying to understand why so many were leaving, named rack-renting as the primary cause over and over again. Parliament even appointed a commission to investigate, alarmed that the departures had reached proportions that threatened to drain Ulster of its entire Protestant population. The commission confirmed what everyone already knew. The landlords were squeezing their tenants, the tenants had no legal protection, and the only rational response for a family with any resources at all was to leave.

Penalized for Their Faith

If the economic pressure was not enough, our ancestors also lived under a system of religious discrimination that made second-class citizens of them in the very province their families had been brought to settle and hold. This is one of the more bitter ironies of the Ulster story — the Presbyterians had been planted in Ulster specifically because they were Protestant, and yet the English Protestant establishment treated them almost as badly as it treated the Catholic Irish.

The reason was denominational. The official state church of England and Ireland was the Anglican Church — the Church of Ireland as it was known there. Presbyterians, though Protestant, were considered dissenters, meaning they stood outside the established church, and the English legal system had a long tradition of making life difficult for dissenters of all kinds.

The most damaging piece of legislation was the Test Act of 1704, which required anyone holding public office, serving in the military, or participating in civic life to take communion according to the rites of the Church of Ireland. For a Presbyterian, that was not merely inconvenient — it was a matter of conscience. Taking Anglican communion amounted to a betrayal of everything their church stood for. The practical effect was to shut Presbyterians out of public life entirely. They could not hold office. They could not serve as officers in the militia. In some cases their marriages performed by Presbyterian ministers were not recognized as legally valid.

And on top of all of that, they were required to pay tithes — a tax supporting the Anglican Church — even though they never attended its services and built and maintained their own churches entirely at their own expense. They were paying to support an institution that excluded them.

The Presbyterian ministers felt all of this as acutely as their congregations did, and they were not quiet about it. From the pulpits of Ulster's Presbyterian churches, ministers preached openly against the injustice of the system and encouraged their people to consider whether a life in America might offer what Ulster no longer could — land of their own, freedom to worship as they chose, and a government that left them alone. These ministers were not merely spiritual leaders. They were community organizers, and their influence in directing the migration cannot be overstated. In many cases entire congregations emigrated together, following their minister across the Atlantic to start a new community from scratch on American soil.

Five Waves: The Slow Exodus

The emigration from Ulster did not happen all at once. It came in five distinct waves between 1717 and 1775, each one triggered by a specific crisis layered on top of the chronic pressures that were always present. Taken together these waves carried somewhere between 200,000 and 250,000 people out of Ulster and onto ships bound for America — one of the largest voluntary migrations in the history of the colonial world.

The First Wave, 1717-1718, was the path opener. The immediate trigger was a severe drought that devastated crops across Ulster and pushed families already struggling

under rising rents to the breaking point. Archbishop King and the Dean of Saint Patrick's Cathedral — Jonathan Swift himself — both wrote at the time that even without the drought, the rack-renting alone had made emigration inevitable for thousands of families. This first wave was significant not so much for its numbers as for what it proved — that the crossing was possible, that land was available in America, and that a family could survive the journey and build something on the other side. The people who went first sent word back, and that word traveled fast through the tight Presbyterian communities of Ulster.

The Second Wave, 1725-1729, came as the rack-renting intensified. The first wave of expiring leases had been bad enough. Now a second round of renewals hit, and landlords who had seen their neighbors successfully raise rents followed suit. The departures during these years were large enough that Parliament's commission was convened specifically in response to them. The emigrants' own letters made the cause unmistakable. By now the flow through Philadelphia and the Delaware ports was well established, and Ulster families knew exactly where they were going and roughly what they would find when they got there.

The Third Wave, 1740-1741, was driven by something even more desperate than rack-renting. Famine struck Ireland in 1740 in what became known as the Great Frost — a catastrophic failure of harvests following an extraordinarily severe winter. An estimated 400,000 people died in Ireland during those two years, a toll that in proportion to the population rivaled the better-known Great Famine of the 1840s. For Ulster Presbyterians who had already been considering emigration, the famine was the final answer to any remaining doubt. This wave also marked the first significant movement of Scots-Irish settlers beyond Pennsylvania, pushing south and west through the Great Valley toward Virginia and the Carolinas — a pattern that would define the next generation of settlement.

The Fourth Wave, 1754-1755, came as yet another round of lease renewals hit and another period of economic hardship settled over Ulster. By this point the emigration had its own momentum. Communities in Pennsylvania and Virginia were writing home about land that was available, cheap, and free of the burdens that had made Ulster intolerable. The Presbyterian network — built around congregations and ministers — functioned as an information system, passing word of opportunities across the Atlantic and organizing groups of families to make the crossing together.

The Fifth and Final Wave, 1771-1775, was the largest of all, and it came just as the political temperature in the American colonies was rising toward revolution. Rents in Ulster had reached heights that made farming genuinely impossible for many families, and a severe economic downturn in the linen industry eliminated the secondary income that had kept many households afloat. The departures in these years were massive — tens of thousands crossing in a period of just a few years. It was during this final wave, in 1772, that five ships sailed directly from Larne on the northeast Irish coast to Charleston, South Carolina, carrying more than 1,200 Presbyterian immigrants under the guidance of their minister, the Reverend William Martin. They were not going to Pennsylvania. They were going straight to the Carolina upcountry, where land was being offered and opportunity was waiting. But that is Part Three's story.

What They Were Leaving Behind

It is worth pausing for a moment to appreciate what the decision to emigrate actually meant for these families. This was not like buying a plane ticket. The crossing took anywhere from six to twelve weeks in conditions that ranged from miserable to genuinely life-threatening. Disease was common on the ships, and it was not unusual for passengers to die before they ever saw American shores — as happened on the *James and Mary* in 1772, where five children died during the passage and the surviving passengers were held in quarantine for six weeks after arriving in Charleston harbor because of a smallpox outbreak on board.

The people who made this crossing were leaving behind not just a place but everything familiar — neighbors, extended family, the graves of their parents, the church their community had built, the land their labor had improved. They were doing it because they had calculated, or had simply felt in their bones, that staying was no longer survivable. The rack-renting had taken or would soon take everything they had worked for. The Test Acts had closed off any path to a better life within the existing system. And word had come back from those who had already gone that on the other side of the Atlantic there was land — real land, land of your own, land that no absentee landlord could take from you when the lease ran out.

For people who had been the instrument of someone else's ambition for a hundred years — planted in Ulster to serve the crown's purposes, squeezed dry when their usefulness was spent — the promise of land they could actually own was not a small thing. It was everything.

They had been Border people, accustomed to displacement. They had been Ulster settlers, accustomed to starting over. Now they were about to become Americans — though they did not know it yet. They knew only that they were done with Ulster, done with absentee landlords, done with paying tithes to a church that excluded them, done with a system that treated them as tools rather than people.

They walked up the gangplank, and they did not look back.

Part Three

The Long Road South:

How Our Ancestors Got From the Ships to the Carolina Piedmont

When our ancestors finally walked off those ships onto American soil, they were not home yet. Not by a long way. The Carolina Piedmont — the place where their story and ours converge — was still hundreds of miles away for most of them, and for some it would take another generation to get there. Part of what makes tracing Scots-Irish

ancestry genuinely challenging is that these people did not come through one port, did not follow one road, and did not arrive all at once. They came in waves over more than half a century, through several different entry points, by different routes, and at different times. If you are trying to find where your family fits in that picture, understanding the full geography of their arrival is the first step.

Where the Ships Landed

The great majority of Scots-Irish immigrants in the colonial period entered America through the ports clustered around the Delaware River — Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, New Castle in Delaware, and Chester just south of Philadelphia. These ports were the primary gateway for the simple reason that Pennsylvania, under the Quaker proprietorship of William Penn, had established a reputation for religious tolerance and available land that made it the most attractive destination in the colonies for people fleeing religious discrimination. A linen trade route already existed between Ulster and Philadelphia, which meant ships were making the crossing regularly and passage was relatively accessible. For a Presbyterian family with enough resources to pay their fare — typically five to six pounds sterling — Philadelphia was the obvious destination.

But Philadelphia was not the only door, and genealogical researchers who focus only on Pennsylvania may be looking in the wrong place entirely.

The earliest Scots-Irish arrivals, going back to the 1670s and through the early 1700s, came primarily into the Chesapeake region — the ports and inlets of Maryland and Virginia along the great bay. These were among the first Ulster Scots to reach American shores, arriving decades before the main waves of the eighteenth century. They settled thickly on the Delmarva Peninsula — the stretch of land taking in parts of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia — where by 1692 one observer noted that Somerset County had become heavily populated with Scots and Irish who had already established the linen industry they had known in Ulster. Presbyterian churches were organized in Maryland, Delaware and Virginia's Eastern Shore as early as the 1680s, anchored by ministers who had come directly from Ulster. If your family line traces back to colonial Maryland, Delaware, or the Virginia tidewater, and you have Scots-Irish surnames, this early Chesapeake settlement is worth investigating seriously.

New England received a small but historically notable group as well. In the summer of 1718, a company of Presbyterians from the Bann Valley of County Londonderry crossed the Atlantic under the encouragement of their ministers and arrived at Boston harbor. It was the first organized community-level migration of Scots-Irish to America. They were not particularly welcome. The Puritans of New England found these independent-minded Presbyterians difficult to absorb, and the newcomers found Puritan society nearly as restrictive in its own way as what they had left behind. Most eventually moved on, and a significant number made their way south and west — ultimately joining the broader stream flowing toward Virginia and the Carolinas. A few settled Londonderry, New Hampshire, which still carries the name today. If your line surfaces unexpectedly in early New England, this 1718 migration may be the explanation.

Then there was Charleston. South Carolina's main port served as a direct entry point for

Scots-Irish immigrants in two distinct periods, and both matter for genealogical research in this region.

The first Charleston period was the 1730s, when South Carolina actively recruited settlers for its underpopulated interior by offering land bounties — free acreage along with tools and seed to families willing to come and settle the upcountry. This was attractive enough that ships began sailing directly from Ulster to Charleston, bypassing Pennsylvania entirely. Families who came through Charleston in the 1730s went straight into the South Carolina backcountry and did not come down the Great Wagon Road at all. Their descendants spread northward into what is now the western Carolinas over subsequent generations.

The second Charleston period came in the 1760s and early 1770s, as South Carolina renewed its recruiting efforts and another round of land bounties brought a fresh wave of direct sailings from Ulster. The most notable of these arrivals came in the fall and winter of 1772, when five ships sailed from Larne on the northeast coast of Ireland and arrived at Charleston harbor carrying more than twelve hundred Presbyterian immigrants under the guidance of their minister, the Reverend William Martin. The ships were the James and Mary, the Pennsylvania Farmer, the Lord Dunluce, the Hopewell, and the Free Mason. The crossing was not easy — five children died on the James and Mary during the passage, and the ship was held in quarantine for six weeks after arriving because of a smallpox outbreak on board. But the survivors claimed their land grants in the South Carolina upcountry and put down roots that spread through the region for generations. If your Scots-Irish line originates in the South Carolina upcountry — in counties like Abbeville, Laurens, Newberry, or Union — Reverend Martin's five ships and the earlier 1730s arrivals are where to look.

Pennsylvania: The Staging Ground

For the majority who came through Philadelphia and the Delaware ports, Pennsylvania was not the final destination — it was the staging ground. And understanding why they left Pennsylvania is just as important as understanding why they came there in the first place.

Pennsylvania in the 1710s and 1720s was genuinely welcoming. Land was available, the government left dissenters alone, and the Presbyterian communities that formed in Lancaster, Chester, and the surrounding counties gave these families the same kind of tight congregational network they had known in Ulster. For a generation, it worked.

There was something else waiting for them in Pennsylvania that they had not expected and could not have anticipated — a practical lesson in frontier building that would serve them for the next hundred years. The Delaware Valley, by the time Scots-Irish families began arriving in numbers, had already been settled for decades by Swedish and Finnish immigrants who had established the colony of New Sweden along the Delaware River as early as 1638. These Scandinavians had brought with them from northern Europe a building tradition that was perfectly suited to a forested frontier — the log cabin.

The Scots-Irish had no tradition of log construction. In Ulster they had built with stone and timber framing in the European manner. But what they saw in Pennsylvania made immediate sense. A log cabin required no nails, no specialized materials, no heavy tools that were impossible to carry on a long journey. A small group of neighbors with axes could raise a serviceable one-room cabin in a day or two from the timber standing right in front of them. For people who were always moving, always arriving in new and undeveloped territory with little more than what they could carry, it was a revelation. They adopted the technique quickly and thoroughly, and it was the Scots-Irish more than any other group who carried the log cabin southward and westward across the American frontier. The Germans who settled alongside them learned the same way — from the Swedes and Finns, not from our ancestors, though the credit has sometimes been misplaced.

But Pennsylvania filled up. By the late 1720s and into the 1730s, land prices in the fertile southeastern counties had risen sharply. Good farmland in Lancaster and Chester counties was no longer cheap, and the same pressure that had driven these families out of Ulster — the sense that the ground beneath them was being priced out of reach — began to build again. The response was the same response these people had always had. They moved.

They moved west first, crossing the Susquehanna River into Cumberland County. But the real movement, the one that would eventually bring their children and grandchildren to the Carolina Piedmont, was southward — following the great natural corridor of the Appalachian valleys toward Virginia and beyond.

The Great Wagon Road

If there is one geographic feature that defines the Scots-Irish migration to this region, it is the Great Wagon Road. This was not a planned highway or a government project. It was a path that grew organically out of the movement of thousands of families, following the natural lay of the land southward through the valleys between the mountain ridges.

From Philadelphia the road ran southwest through Lancaster and York in Pennsylvania, crossed into Maryland, and entered the Great Valley of Virginia — the long, fertile corridor between the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east and the Allegheny ranges to the west. This valley, known in Virginia as the Shenandoah, funneled travelers southward as naturally as a river channel. The road passed through Winchester and Staunton in Virginia, crossed into North Carolina at the Moravian settlements around present-day Winston-Salem, and continued south through the heart of the Carolina Piedmont.

But the Shenandoah Valley did not open up for settlement all at once, and it is important to understand why — because the timing shaped everything about when our ancestors arrived in the Carolinas. The valley had long been contested ground, used by multiple Indian nations as a travel corridor and hunting territory. The Iroquois Confederacy in particular — powerful nations based in New York — had long used the Shenandoah as a north-south raiding path to strike at Cherokee and Catawba territory far to the south. Their war parties moving through the valley made European settlement there genuinely dangerous for years. Virginia's Governor Spotswood negotiated treaties in 1722 and

again in 1744 trying to establish boundaries and reduce the raiding, and these agreements helped open the door — but cautiously and gradually. It was not until the French and Indian War, which ran roughly from 1754 to 1763, that the valley fully cleared of the threat that had kept settlers looking nervously over their shoulders. When that war ended, the flow southward accelerated dramatically.

By the 1740s and 1750s this road was already carrying a steady stream of Scots-Irish families southward. By the 1760s it had become a torrent. Land in the Carolina Piedmont was cheaper than anywhere to the north, the soil was rich, game was abundant, and the colonial governments were actively encouraging settlement. The population of North Carolina grew from roughly 36,000 in 1730 to 70,000 in 1750 to 180,000 by 1770, and most of that growth was in the Piedmont — almost entirely Scots-Irish and German settlers moving down from the north.

The names of the communities they founded along the way are still on the map. The Presbyterian congregations they established are still standing. Sugar Creek, Rocky River, Thyatira, Fourth Creek — these churches in Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Rowan, and Iredell counties were planted by families who had walked or ridden down the Great Wagon Road from Pennsylvania and Virginia, carrying their faith and their fierce independence with them.

The Cherokee and the Opening of the West

For families moving down the Great Wagon Road into the Carolina Piedmont, there was a clear dividing line in the landscape — and in the danger. The Catawba River runs roughly north to south through the western Piedmont, and the situation on each side of it was very different.

East of the Catawba, the Catawba Nation had long been settled and were on generally peaceful terms with European settlers. That side of the river was relatively safe to settle and families were moving into it from the 1730s onward. But west of the Catawba was a different story. That land was Cherokee hunting ground, and the Cherokee were neither settled nor peaceful with the colonists pushing into their territory.

The Anglo-Cherokee War of 1759 to 1761 was the conflict that had to be resolved before the western Piedmont and the mountain foothills could be safely settled in numbers. It was a brutal, short war that grew out of years of accumulated grievances on both sides, and it swept through the Carolina backcountry with raids on isolated farms and frontier settlements. Many families who had already pushed west pulled back east of the Catawba until the fighting was over.

When the war ended in 1761 and a treaty was concluded with the Cherokee, the territory west of the Catawba opened up rapidly. Settlers who had been waiting poured in. The Fourth Creek settlement near present-day Statesville had only 35 families in 1755 during the height of the danger — by 1765, just four years after the Cherokee War ended, it had 119 landholders within ten miles of the meeting house alone. That pattern repeated itself across the western Piedmont and into the foothills.

So if you are tracing ancestors who ended up west of the Catawba River in the Carolina

Piedmont or in the mountain counties, the timeline matters for your research. Records, land grants, and church registrations from that area will cluster in the 1760s and 1770s for the earliest families — not the 1740s or 1750s as they might for families who settled east of the Catawba.

Two Streams Meeting

What makes the genealogy of the Carolina Piedmont and mountains particularly interesting — and particularly complicated — is that our ancestors did not all come from the same direction. Two streams of Scots-Irish settlement converged in this region, and depending on which family line you are tracing, your ancestors may have come by entirely different routes.

The first and larger stream came from the north — down the Great Wagon Road through Pennsylvania and Virginia, spreading through the North Carolina Piedmont from roughly the 1740s onward and pushing into the mountain counties from there.

The second stream came from the south — through Charleston, up into the South Carolina upcountry, and gradually northward into the southern Appalachian foothills. Families who came through Charleston in the 1730s or on Reverend Martin's ships in 1772 became the ancestors of people in communities that sit just over the state line or just into the North Carolina mountains.

If you are researching Scots-Irish ancestry in the western Carolina Piedmont and the mountain foothills — the territory that would eventually become counties like Rutherford, Burke, Lincoln, and the surrounding area — both streams are relevant. This region sits near enough to the convergence point of these two flows that a family on one side of a ridge might have come down from Virginia while the family on the other side came up from South Carolina. Do not assume your ancestors came through Philadelphia. Check Charleston. Check the Chesapeake. Check Virginia land records and South Carolina bounty grants. The road that brought them here was not always the same road.

They Had Arrived. But the Story Was Not Over.

By the 1760s and 1770s, Scots-Irish families were spread across the Carolina Piedmont and pushing into the mountains. They had traveled a road that stretched back, in time and in miles, all the way to the Scottish Borders. They had been planters in Ulster, passengers on dangerous ships, settlers in Pennsylvania, and pioneers on the frontier edge of Virginia and the Carolinas.

They had brought with them their Presbyterian faith, their clannish loyalties, their deep suspicion of distant authority, and the bone-deep conviction that a man ought to be able to hold his own land and answer to nobody for how he worked it. They had learned to build their homes from the Swedes and carried that knowledge across half a continent. They had waited out Indian wars and treaty negotiations and pushed into new territory the moment it was safe — and sometimes before it was. They were, in every sense of the word, a frontier people.

That conviction and that toughness were about to be tested in ways even they had not

imagined. The British crown — the same crown that had used their ancestors as instruments of empire in Ulster, that had taxed their faith and rack-rented their farms — was about to reach into the backcountry one more time. And the response of the people who had settled this region would help decide the outcome of a revolution.

That is Part Four.

Part Four

The Flame They Carried:

How Our Ancestors Settled the Backcountry, Defied Their Government, and Helped Win a Revolution

By the time the first Scots-Irish families began putting down roots in the Carolina Piedmont in the 1740s and 1750s, they had already crossed an ocean, learned a new way to build a house, waited out two Indian wars, and outlasted more landlords and governments than most people encounter in a lifetime. They were not soft people. They were not patient people. And they were not people who took kindly to being told what to do by anyone who had not earned the right to tell them.

What they built in the Carolina backcountry reflected exactly who they were. It was not elegant and it was not easy, but it was theirs — and for people whose entire history had been defined by holding things that belonged to someone else, that distinction meant everything.

What They Built

The first order of business when a Scots-Irish family arrived on a piece of Carolina backcountry land was shelter, and they knew exactly how to provide it. The log cabin technique they had picked up from the Swedes in Pennsylvania came with them down the Great Wagon Road and into the Carolina Piedmont and mountains. With timber standing thick in every direction and a community of neighbors who understood that helping each other build was how everyone survived, a family could have a serviceable one room cabin standing within days of arriving on their land. It was cold in winter and rough by any measure of comfort, but it was solid, it was theirs, and it could go up without a single nail or a trip to a store that did not yet exist.

The farm that grew up around that cabin followed the pattern these families had practiced through generations of frontier living. They grew corn for the family and wheat and tobacco for trade. They kept hogs that could forage in the woods and cattle that could graze on open land. They hunted because the forests were full of game and because a man who could not feed his family from the land around him was not going to

survive long on this frontier regardless of how good his farming was.

But if there is one institution that defined Scots-Irish community life in the Carolina backcountry more than any other, it was not the farm or the courthouse or the trading post. It was the Presbyterian church. These congregations were not merely places of worship. They were the organizing centers of everything — the place where neighbors gathered, where disputes were settled, where news traveled, where education happened, where community identity was forged and maintained. The ministers who led them were among the most influential people in the backcountry, and their influence ran in every direction. They preached, they taught, they organized, and when the time came they did not hesitate to take sides.

The British were not wrong when they called Presbyterianism the religion of rebels. They just did not understand soon enough what that was going to mean for them.

The names of those early congregations are still on the map and still in use today. Sugar Creek. Rocky River. Fourth Creek. Thyatira. Beersheba. These churches in Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Rowan, Iredell and the surrounding counties were the anchors of Scots-Irish community life in this region, and the families whose names appear on their earliest rolls are the families whose descendants still populate much of this area today. If you are researching Scots-Irish ancestry in the western Carolina Piedmont, the records of these Presbyterian congregations are among the most valuable genealogical resources available — in many cases predating courthouse records by years or decades.

The First Rebellions: Two Regulator Movements

Before our ancestors ever took up arms against the British crown, they had already fought their own government — twice. And understanding those two fights is essential to understanding who these people were and why the Revolution hit the backcountry with such explosive force when it finally came.

It is important to note from the outset that although both movements shared the name Regulators, they were completely different situations with almost opposite causes. Lumping them together, as histories sometimes do, does a disservice to both.

The first fight was in South Carolina in the 1760s, and it grew out of a problem that was almost the opposite of what you might expect. The South Carolina backcountry in that period had virtually no government at all. There were no courts, no sheriffs, no jails, no law enforcement of any meaningful kind. The colonial government in Charleston, dominated by wealthy coastal planters who had little interest in the interior, had simply never gotten around to extending legal institutions into the backcountry. The result was that outlaws and criminal gangs operated openly, raiding farms, stealing livestock, terrorizing families, and doing it all with complete impunity because there was nobody to stop them.

The Scots-Irish and other backcountry settlers organized themselves to fill the vacuum. They called themselves Regulators — people who intended to regulate, meaning to bring order to, a lawless situation. They formed militias, rounded up criminals, and

administered rough justice in the absence of any legal system. They were not rebelling against authority. They were demanding that authority show up and do its job. Eventually the colonial government in Charleston responded by establishing courts and extending legal institutions into the interior, and the South Carolina Regulator movement wound down having largely achieved what it set out to do.

The North Carolina Regulator movement that erupted in the same decade was a completely different situation, and it ended very differently. Here the problem was not the absence of government but the corruption of it. The backcountry counties of North Carolina — Rowan, Anson, Orange, Granville and others — had courts and sheriffs and tax collectors, but those officials were crooked. Sheriffs seized property illegally. Lawyers overcharged. Court clerks collected fees they had no right to collect. Tax collectors pocketed money that was supposed to go to the colonial treasury. And the eastern establishment that ran the colonial government in New Bern had no particular interest in cleaning it up because many of them were profiting from the same system.

The backcountry settlers, most of them Scots-Irish small farmers who had very little to begin with and could not afford to be systematically robbed by the people who were supposed to serve them, organized and resisted. They called themselves Regulators too, but their target was not criminals — it was the corrupt officials themselves. At its peak the movement had the support of thousands of people across multiple counties. In Orange County alone, an estimated six to seven thousand of the roughly eight thousand residents supported the Regulators.

It ended on May 16, 1771 at the Battle of Alamance, where Governor William Tryon marched a colonial militia force into the backcountry and crushed the Regulator army. Six Regulator leaders were hanged afterward. Many others fled west into what is now Tennessee, where they established the Watauga settlements — and those same men and their neighbors would play a very significant role in the Revolution just a few years later. The grievances that had produced the movement were not resolved — they were simply suppressed by force.

There is a persistent myth that the defeated North Carolina Regulators, bitter toward the Patriot leadership that had crushed them, went on to become Loyalists when the Revolution came. The documentary evidence does not support it. Of 883 known Regulators, only 34 can be identified as Loyalists. The great majority either fought as Patriots or remained neutral. The anger that had fueled the Regulator movement did not push our ancestors toward the British crown. It pushed them toward revolution.

Neighbor Against Neighbor: The Loyalist Question

When the Revolution came to the Carolina backcountry it came as something uglier and more complicated than the schoolbook version of the war most of us learned growing up. This was not simply colonists against redcoats. In the Carolinas, and particularly in North Carolina, it was also colonists against colonists — neighbor against neighbor, sometimes family against family — in a civil war that was fought with a bitterness that regular warfare rarely produces.

It is important to understand who the Loyalists in North Carolina actually were, because they were not primarily Scots-Irish. The backbone of North Carolina Loyalism was the Highland Scots — a completely different people from our Scots-Irish ancestors, despite the superficial similarity of origin. The Highland Scots had come to the Cape Fear River valley, settling in and around Cross Creek, which is present-day Fayetteville. They were Gaelic speakers, Episcopal in religion, and they had a deep cultural loyalty to the British crown rooted in their clan traditions. Many had arrived recently and owed their land grants directly to the royal government. When Governor Josiah Martin called on Loyalists to rally in February 1776, it was primarily these Highland Scots who answered — roughly 1,300 of the 1,500 who assembled. They marched toward the coast and met the Patriots at Moore's Creek Bridge, where they were decisively defeated in one of the first significant Patriot victories of the war.

There were also pockets of Loyalist sentiment among some backcountry settlers who had arrived very recently, owed their land directly to royal bounty programs, and felt more loyalty to the government that had given them their start than to a Patriot cause led by eastern planters they did not know or trust. In some communities the lines between Patriot and Loyalist reflected local feuds and personal grievances as much as any political principle, and the violence that erupted between the two sides had a personal quality that conventional battlefield combat did not.

But the Scots-Irish of the Carolina Piedmont were Patriots in proportions that stood out even among a largely Patriot colonial population. Their entire history had prepared them for exactly this moment. They had spent generations resisting landlords who took what was theirs, churches that taxed them for services they never received, and governments that treated them as instruments of someone else's ambition rather than as people with rights of their own. When the British crown began reaching into the backcountry — imposing taxes, quartering troops, threatening the independence these families had crossed an ocean and walked hundreds of miles to find — the response was not complicated. These were people who knew how to fight, who were already organized through their church networks, and who had absolutely nothing holding them back from resistance.

The Presbyterian ministers made sure of it. From pulpits across the backcountry they preached the justice of the Patriot cause with the same conviction they brought to scripture. The Mecklenburg Declaration of May 1775 — whether in its precise historical form or in the spirit that produced it — came from this community, from these churches, from these people. Charlotte was called a hornet's nest by Cornwallis himself, and he was not wrong. He would find out just how not wrong he was.

The Revolution in Our Backyard

The war came to the Carolina backcountry in a way that made the fighting in the north look almost orderly by comparison. When the British shifted their strategy south in 1778 and 1779, hoping to use Loyalist support in the Carolinas to pacify the region from the inside, they walked into a situation they had badly misjudged. They expected a compliant population. What they found was a backcountry full of Scots-Irish militiamen who had been fighting and feuding and organizing and resisting authority their entire

lives, and who had no intention of submitting to anyone.

Cornwallis sent Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton into the backcountry to pacify it. Tarleton's methods — brutal, fast-moving, and contemptuous of the rules of war that governed how prisoners were treated — had the opposite of their intended effect. At the Waxhaws in May 1780, Tarleton's forces killed Continental soldiers who were attempting to surrender, an event that became known as Tarleton's Quarter and turned thousands of wavering backcountry settlers into committed Patriots overnight. Tarleton's Quarter became a battle cry. The brutality that was supposed to intimidate the backcountry instead unified it.

Ramseur's Mill, which stood just miles from where many of us live today, was the site of one of those backcountry civil war battles in June 1780 — Patriots against Loyalists, neighbors against neighbors, fought with the particular ferocity that comes when men know each other personally and have old scores to settle. The Patriot militia won, dealing a significant blow to British attempts to consolidate Loyalist strength in the region and preventing a large Loyalist force from joining Cornwallis's main army.

Then came Kings Mountain in October 1780, and it changed everything.

Patrick Ferguson, the only British officer on the field that day, had made a fatal mistake. He had sent a message into the backcountry warning the over-mountain men — the settlers in the Watauga and Holston River valleys west of the Blue Ridge, many of them former North Carolina Regulators and their families who had fled west after Alamance — that if they did not cease their opposition to the crown he would march over the mountains and lay waste to their settlements.

He should not have said that.

The over-mountain men did not wait for Ferguson to come to them. About a thousand of them assembled at Sycamore Shoals on the Watauga River, elected their own officers, and marched over the mountains to find him. They were joined by militia from the Carolina Piedmont — men from Rowan, Mecklenburg, Lincoln and the surrounding counties, the same Scots-Irish stock, the same Presbyterian backbone, the same generations of accumulated fury at being pushed around by distant authority.

They found Ferguson on top of Kings Mountain on October 7, 1780. The battle lasted less than an hour. Ferguson was killed. His entire force of over a thousand men was killed, wounded, or captured. There was not a single regular British soldier among the Loyalist force — Kings Mountain was fought entirely between American Patriots and American Loyalists, with Patrick Ferguson as the lone exception. It was the most purely American battle of the Revolution.

The effect on Cornwallis was immediate. He had been preparing to push north into North Carolina. Instead he turned his army around and retreated back into South Carolina, his plans in ruins. But the backcountry was not finished with him yet.

Three months later, on January 17, 1781, the second hammer fell — at a place called Cowpens, just across the state line in present-day Spartanburg County, South Carolina, barely a day's ride from the ground where Kings Mountain had been fought.

Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, commanding a mixed force of Continental regulars and Carolina backcountry militia — including substantial numbers of North Carolina and South Carolina Scots-Irish riflemen under Colonel Andrew Pickens — chose his ground carefully and laid a trap for Tarleton, who was pursuing him through the backcountry with characteristic aggression. Morgan positioned his militia in the front lines and instructed them to fire two volleys and fall back. Tarleton's troops, contemptuous of militia and certain they were routing a beaten force, broke ranks and charged in pursuit — straight into a wall of Continental regulars who were waiting for exactly that moment. At the same time the militia reformed and hit the British from one side while cavalry under William Washington struck from the other. The battle lasted less than an hour, just like Kings Mountain. Tarleton escaped, but his force was effectively destroyed.

Taken together, Kings Mountain and Cowpens were a one-two combination that Cornwallis simply could not absorb. He had lost the cream of his light troops — the fast-moving, hard-hitting forces he depended on for intelligence, pursuit, and rapid strikes. Without them his freedom of movement in the Carolinas was gone. He stripped his army of its supply wagons and chased General Nathanael Greene north through North Carolina in a desperate attempt to bring him to battle, won a costly and hollow victory at Guilford Courthouse in March 1781 that cost him more men than he could replace, and then limped east to the Virginia coast, eventually reaching Yorktown. Where he surrendered.

The road from Kings Mountain and Cowpens to Yorktown runs in a straight line. Most historians who have studied the southern campaign agree that without those two backcountry victories, the British strategy for pacifying the South might well have succeeded, and the outcome of the Revolution itself might have been very different. Both battles were won primarily by Scots-Irish backcountry militia — men from these hills, these valleys, these Presbyterian congregations. Men whose grandfathers had been rack-rented out of Ulster and whose great-grandfathers had been planted in Ireland by a king's ambition. They did not fight because a general ordered them to. In both cases they largely organized themselves, elected their own officers, and went looking for the fight. It was the most Scots-Irish thing imaginable.

What They Had Won

When the Revolution ended and the treaties were signed, the people of the Carolina backcountry had something their ancestors had never possessed in Scotland, in Ulster, or in the first uncertain years in America. They had land that was genuinely theirs — not leased from an absentee landlord, not held at the pleasure of a crown that could revoke it, not dependent on anyone else's goodwill or political calculation. Veterans received land grants across the western Piedmont and mountain counties, and many of them settled precisely in the territory we are talking about, which means that for genealogical researchers, the land grant records of the 1780s and 1790s in this region are a direct window into who was here first and where they came from.

The communities they built after the war — the county seats, the academies, the churches, the mills — were built by people who had earned the right to build them in the most direct way imaginable. They had fought for this ground. They had buried people

they loved in it. They had walked a very long road to get here, a road that began in the Scottish Borders more than a century and a half before, and they were not going anywhere.

Their story does not end with the Revolution. In many ways it begins there. The character that had been forged across generations of hardship and displacement and resistance — the character that showed up so unmistakably at Kings Mountain and Cowpens and Ramseur's Mill — did not disappear when the war ended. It became the defining character of this region, and through this region it shaped the character of a nation.

That is Part Five.

Part Five

The Seed and the Harvest:

How the People Who Settled Our Region Helped Shape the American Character

There is a question that hangs over everything we have covered in this series, and it deserves a direct answer. Why does any of this matter today? The ships that carried our ancestors across the Atlantic are long gone. The log cabins they built have rotted back into the earth. The specific grievances that drove them from Ulster — the rack-renting, the Test Acts, the absentee landlords — belong to a world so distant that most people in this region have never heard of them.

And yet the character those people carried with them — forged in the Scottish Borders, tested in Ulster, hardened on the American frontier — did not disappear when they settled this land. It went into the soil with them. It came back up in their children and their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren, showing up in courthouses and statehouses and battlefields and recording studios and the halls of Congress and the White House itself, generation after generation, in ways that shaped this nation as profoundly as any other force in American history.

This is that story.

A Word About What We Are Claiming

Before we go further it is worth saying clearly what this series is and is not arguing. America was not built by one people. The English established the coastal colonies and the legal and governmental framework the nation inherited. The Germans were indispensable partners on the frontier, including right here in the Carolina Piedmont where German and Scots-Irish families settled side by side, built churches in the same valleys, and fought in the same militia companies. African Americans built enormous

portions of the physical and economic foundation of the South under conditions of profound injustice, and their cultural contributions to this nation — in music, in language, in faith — run as deep as any. Other groups contributed in their own essential ways, and none of that should be diminished.

But there is a strong and well-supported argument — made by serious historians including David Hackett Fischer in *Albion's Seed* and James Webb in *Born Fighting* — that the Scots-Irish backcountry culture provided something specific and irreplaceable that no other group contributed in quite the same way or to quite the same degree. They provided the cultural DNA of what the world recognizes as distinctly American. The fierce independence. The suspicion of distant authority. The frontier spirit. The volunteer fighting tradition. The plain-spoken directness. The democratic conviction that power belongs to ordinary people and not to aristocrats or distant governments. The evangelical faith. The music.

These are the things the world identifies as characteristically American, and they trace more directly and more consistently to the Scots-Irish backcountry culture — to the people who settled this region — than to any other single source. That is not a small claim. But it is a defensible one.

Right Here at Home: The Shelby Dynasty

Before we look at the national picture it is worth pausing on something that happened right here in our own backyard, because it illustrates perfectly the kind of people these Scots-Irish settlers produced and the scale of influence they were capable of generating even from a small town in the Carolina Piedmont.

The city of Shelby, county seat of Cleveland County, is named for Isaac Shelby — one of the commanders of the Patriot militia at Kings Mountain. The county itself is named for Benjamin Cleveland, another Kings Mountain commander. The very names on our map are monuments to the men our ancestors fought beside in October 1780. That is worth sitting with for a moment.

And then, a century and a half after Kings Mountain, that same community produced what became known as the Shelby Dynasty — a group of six men from this small Carolina Piedmont town who controlled North Carolina state government for twenty consecutive years from 1929 to 1949, and whose influence reached all the way to Washington. O. Max Gardner served as governor during the depths of the Great Depression and went on to serve in the administrations of both Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. His brother-in-law Clyde Hoey served as governor and then as United States Senator. Edwin Yates Webb served in Congress and as a federal judge. The Dynasty guided North Carolina through two of the most turbulent decades in American history — the Depression and World War Two — from a base of power rooted in this community.

These men did not come from nowhere. They came from the same stock, the same Presbyterian tradition, the same culture of self-reliance and civic engagement and fierce determination to make something of what they had been given, that had characterized

this community since the first Scots-Irish families walked down the Great Wagon Road and settled west of the Catawba. The Shelby Dynasty was not an accident. It was a harvest from seed planted generations before.

The Children Who Kept Moving: Westward Expansion

The same restless energy that had carried our ancestors from Scotland to Ulster to Pennsylvania to the Carolina Piedmont did not stop when they got here. The generation that fought at Kings Mountain and Cowpens had children who looked west past the mountains and saw more land, more opportunity, more frontier to claim. And they did what their people had always done. They moved.

The sons and daughters of the Carolina backcountry poured through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1780s and 1790s. They established the first American settlements west of the Appalachians. They built the communities that became cities. They created the political and military leadership that drove American expansion across the continent for the next half century.

The names tell the story. Andrew Jackson was born in the Waxhaws on the Carolina border, the son of Irish immigrants fresh off the boat from Ulster, raised in the same Scots-Irish Presbyterian culture that produced the Kings Mountain fighters. He became a Tennessee lawyer, a frontier general, and the seventh President of the United States. The era of his presidency is still called the Age of Jackson, and the democratic, anti-aristocratic, plain-people political tradition he embodied was a direct expression of the Scots-Irish backcountry culture he came from.

James Knox Polk was born in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina — right next door to where we sit — the descendant of Ulster Scots who had come through Maryland and settled in the Carolina backcountry. His great uncle Thomas Polk had signed the Mecklenburg Declaration. James moved to Tennessee, became its governor, and then became the eleventh President of the United States. The family tree runs straight from Ulster through our neighborhood to the White House.

Sam Houston, who led the Texas Revolution and became the first president of the Republic of Texas, was shaped by the same Scots-Irish Tennessee frontier culture. Davy Crockett, another Tennessee Scots-Irish frontiersman whose family came from the Carolina backcountry, became one of the most iconic figures in American popular mythology. These were not isolated individuals. They were products of a culture, and that culture had its deepest American roots in the Carolina backcountry.

The Presidents They Produced

The Scots-Irish contribution to the American presidency is one of the most remarkable and least appreciated facts in American political history. Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk had direct roots in the Carolina Piedmont. But the list of presidents with Scots-Irish Ulster ancestry runs much further than most people realize.

Jackson, Polk, Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses Grant, Chester Arthur, William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson — all carried Scots-Irish

Ulster heritage. McKinley was so proud of that heritage that he spoke at a national Scots-Irish conference. Wilson said that the Covenanter tradition behind him sent echoes down through the years of his life. Grant's maternal great-grandfather left County Tyrone for America and settled in the Carolina region before the family moved west. Truman carried Scots-Irish blood on both sides of his family.

By one careful estimate more than half of all American presidents have been able to claim some Scottish or Scots-Irish ancestry. The period from the 1820s through the early twentieth century — the era that pushed the frontier to the Pacific, fought the Civil War, rebuilt the nation afterward, and led the country into its first great role on the world stage — was dominated to a remarkable degree by men who traced their roots to the same Ulster Presbyterian stock that walked down the Great Wagon Road and settled the Carolina backcountry.

Woodrow Wilson perhaps said it best, and with characteristic directness. He once remarked that no one who amounts to anything is without some Scots-Irish blood. He was not entirely wrong.

The Music They Left Behind

There is one more contribution that deserves its own moment, because most people enjoy it every day without having any idea where it came from.

The music of the Carolina mountains and the broader Appalachian region — the fiddle tunes, the ballads, the close harmonies, the modal scales that give old-time music its distinctive haunting quality — traces directly back to the musical traditions the Scots-Irish brought with them from the Scottish Borders and Ulster. These were people who carried their music the way they carried their faith — not as an ornament but as a necessity, as much a part of daily life as work or prayer.

That music did not stay in the mountains. It flowed down into the Piedmont, mixed with African American musical traditions in ways that produced something entirely new, and eventually gave the world country music, bluegrass, and through those forms rock and roll itself. The chord progressions, the vocal styles, the storytelling tradition, the instrument families — the DNA of American popular music runs back through these hills to the people we have been writing about throughout this series.

And right here in Shelby, Cleveland County, two men gave that inheritance to the world in ways that cannot be overstated.

Earl Scruggs was born in 1924 in the Flint Hill community of Cleveland County. He developed the three-finger banjo picking style that became the defining sound of bluegrass music — a technique so distinctive and so influential that it now simply bears his name. Scruggs style. When the world fell in love with bluegrass, it fell in love with something Earl Scruggs crystallized from a musical tradition that had been alive in these hills since the first Scots-Irish settlers came down the Great Wagon Road.

Don Gibson was born in Shelby in 1928. He wrote Oh Lonesome Me and I Can't Stop Loving You — two of the most recorded songs in the history of country music, songs

that have been covered by artists on every continent and in virtually every musical style imaginable. Gibson was called the Sad Poet, and the longing and directness in his writing was pure Scots-Irish — the same plain-spoken emotional honesty that had characterized this people since before they ever crossed the Atlantic.

Both men have theaters and centers bearing their names in Shelby today. That a single small Carolina Piedmont town produced both of them is not a coincidence. It is an expression of something deep in the cultural soil of this place.

The Character That Remained

What is it that we actually inherited from these people? What is the thing that persists, that you can still feel in this region if you know what you are looking for?

It is not a simple thing to name, but it is real. It is the conviction that a person ought to be able to stand on their own ground, make their own decisions, and answer to nobody who has not earned the right to give orders. It is the suspicion of distant authority — the instinct that people far away in positions of power do not understand your life and are probably not acting in your interest. It is the willingness to volunteer for a fight when something genuinely important is at stake, and the stubbornness to keep fighting long past the point when a more comfortable people would have quit.

It is the plain-spoken directness that does not dress things up or soften hard truths for the sake of politeness. It is the loyalty to community and family and the people you know personally that runs deeper than any abstract political principle. It is the faith — personal, direct, not mediated by hierarchy — that has characterized the religious culture of this region since the first Presbyterian congregations were organized in log meeting houses west of the Catawba River.

These are not random traits. They are not coincidences of geography. They are the specific inheritance of a specific people who came to this specific place carrying everything they had survived — Scotland, Ulster, the Atlantic crossing, the frontier, the Revolution — and put it into the ground here.

The historian James Webb, himself of Scots-Irish descent, spent years documenting this legacy in his book *Born Fighting* and arrived at a conclusion that the people of this region would recognize instinctively if not always consciously. That this culture — stubborn, independent, fiercely loyal, suspicious of privilege and pretension, willing to fight and work and sacrifice for what it believed in — did more to define the American national character than any other single force in our history.

Standing here in the Carolina Piedmont, looking at the names on our courthouses and our churches and our music venues, knowing what we now know about the road that brought these people here, it is hard to argue with him.

They were our ancestors. And they built something that lasted.

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