Julia Fish

I discovered the Regulator Movement as a third grader, visiting a monument just behind my elementary school. On the edge of a field, underneath an immense tree lay a plaque, reading: ON THIS SPOT WERE HANGED / BY ORDER OF A TORY COURT / JUNE 19, 1771 / MERRILL, MESSER, MATTER, PUGH / AND TWO OTHER REGULATORS.[[1]](#endnote-1) On that day, while running relays and playing tag on a battlefield, I became firmly fascinated with the Regulator Movement, and the men whose death occurred above my head.

 The Regulator Movement was formed by everyday Carolinians: farmers, merchants, and blacksmiths, men who sought to right the wrongs they saw in their world.[[2]](#endnote-2) Captain Benjamin Merrill was one such man, a settler who stood against an unjust government. A North Carolinian integral to his community and instrumental in an event that set the stage for the Revolutionary war. Captain of the Rowan County Militia and integral member of the Regulator Movement, Merrill was a man of many talents.[[3]](#endnote-3) He served his state and community proudly, and was always on hand to help train, support, and lead his men and fellow officers. He carried his military skills and leadership through to the Regulators, commanding over three hundred men at the Regulators’ height.

 When not engaged with the militia, Merrill was a gunsmith. He harnessed a river to power his boring operations, built his own water wheel, and ran his boring machines at night.[[4]](#endnote-4) This unconventional method gave him the freedom to devote his day-time hours to different activities, whether militaristic or familial. Merrill was very much a family man- he and his wife, Jemima Smith, had ten children together.[[5]](#endnote-5) Their family was very close-knit, spending hours together on the grounds of their plantation, playing in their gardens and barns, and attending church. Avid churchgoers, Merrill and his wife helped found the Jersey Settlement Baptist Church in Rowan County, a church that remains active to this day.[[6]](#endnote-6) A church deacon, Merrill attended mass with his family several times a week.

Despite his many roles, Merrill always made time for the simpler things in life. An avid planter, he spent many hours in the gardens of his plantation with his family, planting flowers, trees, and working with his apiary. His oak trees grew magnificently, his gardens were striking, and the plantation was never mentioned without including glowing descriptions of each.

While his family saw his loving and creative side, the rest of the world saw Captain Merrill as a man of integrity, character, and moral fortitude. Respected and admired even by his enemies, he showed strength and kindness from birth till death. From his role in the Regulator movement, he was sentenced to death, as a message to those who would dare to speak out against the Governor.[[7]](#endnote-7) Standing on the gallows, Merrill's last thoughts were of his faith and his family. He spoke of his sorrow and inner conflict over his treason to the King, but expressed his feeling that he had made the right decision in joining the Regulators.[[8]](#endnote-8) He declared it the only action possible in line with his beliefs and principles, and praised his men for their faith and stalwartness. After his death, it was remarked by the Tories that "If all went to the gallows with Captain Merrill's character, hanging would be an honorable death."[[9]](#endnote-9)

 The Regulator Movement set the stage for the Revolutionary War, uniting North Carolinians and providing the first challenge against the British.[[10]](#endnote-10) The Regulators were formed of men like Captain Benjamin Merrill- common settlers and citizens trying to build a home for their families, called to arms by injustice. Merrill was a leader and a hero to all, becoming a unifying force for North Carolinians, a reminder of what everyone could do for freedom and justice. His death became a symbol, because his life was an inspiration. Now, when I visit the plaque marking his and other Regulators’ deaths, I think about that life. Captain Merrill’s character, his sacrifices, his family and community, and the fight that he began. A fight for justice by ordinary North Carolinians; a battle that not only changed their town and country, but set the stage to change the entire world.

1. "The Regulator Monument | NCpedia." <https://www.ncpedia.org/monument/regulator-monument>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. "Regulator Movement | NCpedia." <https://www.ncpedia.org/history/colonial/regulator-movement>. Accessed 21 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. "Some Neglected History of North Carolina: Being an ... - Google Books." <https://books.google.com/books/about/Some_Neglected_History_of_North_Carolina.html?id=TiwrAQAAIAAJ>. Accessed 21 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. "Captain Benjamin Merrell & The Regulators - Sons of DeWitt Colony ...." <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/mckstmerreg.htm>. Accessed 21 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. "Captain Benjamin Merrell & The Regulators - Sons of DeWitt Colony ...." <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/mckstmerreg.htm>. Accessed 22 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. "A history of the Liberty Baptist Association from its organization in ...." <https://archive.org/details/historyofliberty00shee>. Accessed 22 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. "Hillsborough Riot (1770) - North Carolina History Project." <http://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/hillsborough-riot-1770/>. Accessed 21 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. "Captain Benjamin Merrell & The Regulators - Sons of DeWitt Colony ...." <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/mckstmerreg.htm>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. "Some Neglected History of North Carolina: Being an ... - Google Books." <https://books.google.com/books/about/Some_Neglected_History_of_North_Carolina.html?id=TiwrAQAAIAAJ>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. "Regulator Movement | NCpedia." [https://www.ncpedia.org/history/colonial/regulator-movement. Accessed 20 Jan. 2018](https://www.ncpedia.org/history/colonial/regulator-movement.%20Accessed%2020%20Jan.%202018).

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