

ON THIS SPOT WERE HANGED  
BY ORDER OF A TORRY COURT

JUNE 19, 1771

MERRILL. MESSER, MATTER, PUGH  
AND TWO OTHER REGULATORS

PLACED BY

THE DURHAM - ORANGE COMMITTEE  
NORTH CAROLINA SOCIETY  
COLONIAL DAMES IN AMERICA  
APRIL, 1963

*In Recognition and Appreciation of the Bronze Marker Placed at the Regulator Site in Hillsborough, North Carolina, April 1963, Which Has Educated Tens of Thousands of Visitors in the Decades Since Then,*  
This

*Certificate of Recognition  
& Appreciation*

Is Presented to

*The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina & the Durham-Orange Committee of the Same, for Unswerving Devotion to Preserving our Public Heritage.*

*On Behalf of a Grateful Nation, "Thank You!"*

*June 19, 2013 - Regulator Day - Hillsborough, North Carolina*

## Town remembers the 6 Regulators who died 242 years ago

By Erin Wiltgen, News of Orange staff writer [e.wiltgen@newsfororange.com](mailto:e.wiltgen@newsfororange.com) | Posted: Friday, June 28, 2013 1:32 pm

The bell tolled out six, long doleful notes to the evening sky, counting out the lives of the men who died 242 years ago on what is now a grassy hill separating Cameron Park Elementary School and the Board of Education.

Hillsborough community members gathered Wednesday, June 19, to remember the Regulators who were hanged in town the same day in 1771. The Orange County Historical Museum also recognized the Durham-Orange Committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina, who set up a memorial plaque on the site six decades ago.

“Some special spirits must be watching over it because it is in such good shape 60 years later,” Scott Washington, assistant director at the museum, said. “The countless children and youth and adults that come to this site and have been educated in reading this cannot be underestimated.”

The Regulators were a group of North Carolinians who protested unfair taxation and fees, voicing their concerns to colonial officials, particularly Edmund Fanning, the right-hand man of English colonial Gov. William Tryon.

In September 1770, a group of regulators poured into the Orange County Courthouse, disrupting business and assaulted Fanning. They damaged the church bell—which they claimed the government had bought with their money—broke into Fanning’s house and destroyed the building.

On May 16, 1771, Tryon attempted to bring the protests to a halt. He confronted the gathered Regulators in Alamance County, near what is now Burlington, shooting one man to try to incite a reaction from the rebels. When that didn’t work, he ordered the cannons to fire at point-blank range into the crowd; the Regulators defended themselves but were caught by surprise and outmatched.

Tryon spent the next month hunting down the leaders of the movement, looting their farms and burning their houses to the ground. Those who didn’t pay their taxes either fled or were killed. Six of them—James Pugh, Capt. Benjamin Merrill of the Colonial Militia, Robert Matear, Capt. Robert Messer of the Colonial Militia and two unnamed men—were hanged on June 19, 1771, their bodies left in an anonymous common grave.

Two days later, Tryon left to become the governor of the New York colony.

“We’re here tonight because 242 years ago, six brave Americans were executed by English colonial Gov. William Tryon,” Washington said. “They were called Regulators. They were accused and convicted of high treason, but there’s not a lot of evidence that they were guilty of anything more than exercising freedom of speech, freedom of petition and freedom of assembly.”

As for the two unnamed, Washington said they withheld their identity to save their homes and their families.

“I call them the unknown patriots,” he said. “They didn’t give up their names. No one could identify them, and, in their selfless act, they saved their families and their farms. Not all were so lucky, but the sacrifice that these men made led to what we know today as the Bill of Rights.”

In the summer of 1788, officials in Hillsborough gathered to debate the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Even though 10 states had already approved the document—and it only took nine of the 13 colonies to pass it—the North Carolina delegation decided to neither ratify nor reject the document, the only state to do so.

“North Carolina recognized that something was missing: There were no amendments; there was no Bill of Rights,” Washington said. “Certainly what weighed heavily, I’m sure, on those delegates’ minds was two blocks away was this site and the fact that these brave men didn’t have a Bill of Rights to protect them.”

North Carolina’s action led the first Congress to approve 12 of James Madison’s 20 proposed amendments, and the states passed all but two of those.

“On Dec. 15, 1791, Virginia ratified the amendments,” Washington said. “Ten of 12—which had gotten enough votes—became what we know today as the Bill of Rights, a beacon of hope to the world and certainly a shining light for all of us.”

And for those men who died without such protection, people in the community have worked to make certain that their story doesn’t slip away with the passing of time. The Durham-Orange Committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina placed a permanent bronze marker on the site in April 1963, and Washington said tens of thousands of visitors have passed by the plague over the years.

“On behalf of a grateful nation and on behalf of a grateful town,” Mayor Tom Stevens told representatives of the group gathered at the 242nd anniversary commemoration. “You really captured a lot of the spirit of the Hillsborough community.”