

The Welsh in the Carolinas in the Eighteenth Century

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This essay explores two early Welsh settlements in North and South Carolina in the eighteenth century. The Welsh settlements in the Carolinas had some similarities and differences. Each was settled by Welsh settlers from Pennsylvania, (later New Castle County Delaware) in the early eighteenth century. The Welsh who migrated to the Carolinas were Calvinists; those going to North Carolina were Presbyterians from Pencader Hundred who settled on the Northeastern Cape Fear in present Duplin County, North Carolina as early as 1725. The Mosley Map of North Carolina published in 1738 also depicts two Welsh settlements, one on the Northeast Cape Fear River in Duplin County, and the other on the Cape Fear River in Pender County.¹ The Welsh settlers who migrated to South Carolina between the years 1736 and 1746 were primarily Calvinist Baptists who settled in the upper Pee Dee River Region of present day Marlboro County, South Carolina.²

The first published eighteenth century account of the Welsh who migrated from Pennsylvania to Delaware was "An Account of the Cape Fear Country, 1731" written by Hugh Meredith for the Pennsylvania Gazette. Hugh Meredith was a Welsh Pennsylvanian who formed a partnership with Benjamin Franklin in printing in 1728. Meredith did not like the printing business, preferring instead farm work. He also liked to drink. He wrote Franklin: "I see this as a business I am not fitted for. I was bred a farmer and put myself at 30 years of age

¹For a general description of the Welsh settlements in North Carolina, see William S. Powell, North Carolina Through Four Centuries, (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1989), 112, hereafter cited as Powell, North Carolina Through Four Centuries; Lawrence Lee, The Lower Cape Fear in Colonial Days, (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1965), 183; Mosley Map of North Carolina, 1738, North Carolina Department of Archives and History.

² For information on the Welsh in South Carolina, see David Duncan Wallace, South Carolina: A Short History, (Columbia South Carolina: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1951), 154-55; Walter Edgar, South Carolina A History, (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1998), 50, 59, 60, 62 and 585; For earlier published sources on the South Carolina Welsh, see Alexander Gregg, History of the Old Cheraws: Containing an Account of the Aborigines of the Pee Dee, the First White Struggle of the Revolution, and Growth of the Country Afterward: Extending from about A.D. 1730 to 1810, with Notices of Families and Sketches of Individuals (New York: Richardson and Company, 1867); also see Harvey Toliver Cook, Ramble in the Pee Dee Basin (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1926); see also J.A.W. Thomas, A History of Marlboro County, South Carolina (Atlanta, Georgia: The Foote and Daniel Company, 1897).

an apprentice to learn a new trade. Many of our Welsh people are going to settle in North Carolina, where land is cheap. I am inclined to go with them and follow my own employment."³

Apparently impressed with Hugh Meredith's account of North Carolina, Benjamin Franklin published his account in two issues of the Pennsylvania Gazette on May 6, and May 13, 1731. Meredith traveled from Philadelphia to New Town, later Wilmington, North Carolina near the mouth of the Cape Fear River by boat. He described New Town as having an excellent harbor, as well as the potential to become a commercial and government center of the province. He observed: "tho' at present but a poor unprovided Place, consisting of not above 10 or 12 scattering mean Houses, hardly worth the name of a village."⁴ His account is also very descriptive of the terrain, the rivers, the swamps, the trees and the animals that inhabit the forests. "Most of the Country is well cloathed with tall Pines, excepting the Swamps and Savannahs, and some small Strips by the Sides of Rivers."⁵ He noted that the savannahs in present day Brunswick County, "are good pasturage for cattle; Beneath the Grass there is a fine black Mould ... on a bluish white Clay. In moderately wet Summers they might make tolerable good Rice-Ground, as is done with the like in South Carolina."⁶ Also Meredith's described the swamp and river water to be "of a dusky Complementation, and looks much like high-coloured Malt Small-Beer."⁷

About twenty miles inland he stayed in the home of David Evans, a former magistrate from New Castle County, Delaware. He noted: "The Land he lives on is pretty good and the highest I saw in the Country, but there is only a small body of it."⁸ Meredith then traveled with Mr. Evans and two others to the Northeast Cape Fear River, about eighty miles inland. He noted that the Northeast Cape Fear had a number of Welsh settlers who migrated from Pennsylvania to North Carolina around 1725. He found those Welsh proficient in the naval stores industry, as well as growing corn. He wrote that the Indians were no longer a threat to the settlers, but "Thomas James, whose Settlement they plundered and burnt, and murdered him and his Family. But now there is not an Indian to be seen." He concluded his account by noting that the

³ Earl Gregg Swem, ed., An Account of the Cape Fear Country, 1731, by Hugh Meredith, (Perth Amboy, New Jersey, Charles E. Heartman, 1922), 8, hereafter cited as Swem, ed., An Account of the Cape Fear Country; For the early friendship between Hugh Meredith (ca. 1697-ca. 1749) and Benjamin Franklin at Samuel Keimer's Printer Shop in Philadelphia, see Walter Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin: An American Life, (New York and London, Simon & Schuster, 2003), 53-55, 467, and 499; Also see, Leonard W. Labaree, ed., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. 1, January 6, 1706 through December 31, 1734, (New Haven, CT., Yale Univ. Press, 1959), 113-14, 175.

⁴ Swem, ed., An Account of the Cape Fear Country, 15.

⁵ Swem, ed., An Account of the Cape Fear Country, 14.

⁶ Swem, ed., An Account of the Cape Fear Country, 17.

⁷ Swem, ed., An Account of the Cape Fear Country, 22.

⁸ Swem, ed., An Account of the Cape Fear Country, 21.

agricultural goods produced in the region were cheap, but goods imported are 50 and 100 percent higher than can be bought in Philadelphia, especially rum and osnaburgs."⁹

Apparently, Meredith's account of the Cape Fear region of North Carolina encouraged the Welsh from Pennsylvania and Delaware to migrate to North Carolina. It appears that the Welsh settlement of the Cape Fear region in the eighteenth century was far more extensive than what previous observers have believed. In 1964, Harry Roy Merrens in his book on the historic geography of the state wrote, that other than Hugh Meredith's 1731 account, "there is no further information on the Welsh settlers in the colony, which suggests that they could not have been very numerous." Thus, in Merrens' view, the Welsh in North Carolina settled in rural areas, and they established no villages or towns that provided a cohesive "focal point of community life and organization, and with farms spread thinly over a fairly large area into which other more numerous settlers soon came, Welsh settlements probably quickly lost whatever distinctiveness they may have possessed at the outset."¹⁰

In 1994, Dallas Herring, the director of the Duplin County Historical Society wrote a brief article titled "The Cape Fear Welsh Settlements," disagreeing with Merrens observations of the early Welsh in North Carolina. According to Herring, "The land records verify that a bona fide Welsh settlement existed and thousands of Welsh descendents still occupy the region." Through his genealogical research, he concluded that there were Welsh families who migrated from other colonies to the Middle Cape Fear region of Duplin County, and Sarah Meredith owned an eighteenth century Welsh Bible. Herring continued: "The land records document the steady influx of settlers in the following years. A great many of them were Welsh and among them were Bloodworth, Thomas, Davis, Jones, Bowen, Morgan, Wells, James, Williams and others." Herring concluded that most of the early Welsh settlers came to North Carolina for economic rather than religious reasons, and "The Cape Fear was to them the long -promised land."¹¹

The Welsh settlers were not confined to the Northeast Cape Fear River in Duplin and Pender Counties. Rather, their settlement extended eighty to ninety miles inland along the creeks flowing into the Cape Fear and the Northeast Cape Fear Rivers. Many Welsh who came to North Carolina in the eighteenth century

⁹ Swem, ed., *An Account of the Cape Fear Country*, 29.

¹⁰ H. Roy Merrens, *Colonial North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century*, (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1964), 7.

¹¹ William Dallas Herring, "The Cape Fear Welsh Settlements," 2-3, unpublished manuscript, Duplin County Historical Society; hereafter cited as Herring, "The Cape Fear Welsh Settlements."

settled along the creeks that drained into those rivers. These creeks and swamps include such names as Rockfish, James', Swifts', and Smith's Creeks, Black Mingo and Goshen Swamps, and the Black River that runs through southeastern North Carolina. This region today covers parts of the present counties of Bladen, Columbus, Duplin, Onslow, Jones, Brunswick, Pender and Sampson Counties. The reason this Welsh settlement was so spread out in North Carolina was due to the naval stores industry, spurred on by Parliament when in the early eighteenth century it granted a bounty on naval stores in North Carolina. This British bounty on naval stores encouraged Welsh settlers to migrate from Pennsylvania (later New Castle County Delaware) to North Carolina in the 1730s. Those who migrated to North Carolina were primarily Presbyterians who attended the Pencader Hundred Presbyterian Church in New Castle County Delaware.¹²

The Presbyterian Churches established by these Welsh settlers on the creeks flowing into the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear Rivers had a strong cultural influence on the region. This evidence exists in the church minutes and the church graveyards. An example of this Welsh ethnicity survives at Rock Fish and Hopewell Presbyterian Churches in Duplin County. These churches began in the eighteenth century and the graveyards have tombstones with Welsh surnames, such as Bowen, Morgan, Owen, Edwards, Thomas, Evans, James, Jones, Williams, and Wells. Today, these surnames continue to be prominent in southeastern North Carolina. There is also a small community in Columbus County, named Iron Hill, perhaps associated with the town of Iron Hill in Delaware. In 1780, descendents of the early Welsh settlers in Duplin County successfully petitioned the North Carolina state legislature and established the first incorporated town in that county named Secreta, a Welsh word meaning wisdom. First settled by the Welsh in 1736, the town of Secreta was situated on the Northeast Cape Fear River, and today the town no longer exists. Today it is a crossroads in rural Duplin County. With the coming of the railroads in the 1880s, the town of Secreta dried up when residents moved to the neighboring railroad towns of Kenansville, Faison, and Beulaville, Magnolia, Rose Hill and Wallace.¹³

The first student to enroll in the University of North Carolina when it opened its doors in 1795 was Hinton James, a descendent of the early Welsh settlers of Pender County.¹⁴ In addition, some people of Welsh descent moved from the Welsh settlement in the Welsh Tract of South Carolina to North Carolina. In the 1760s, the Welsh Neck Baptist Church Minutes recorded that

¹² Herring, "The Cape Fear Welsh Settlements," 3.

¹³ Wallace; See Leon Sikes, Duplin County Places: Past and Present (Wallace, NC: Wallace Enterprises, 1984), 76; Faison Wells McGowen and Pearl Canady McGowen, eds., Flashes of Duplin's History and Government (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton, 1977), 31-32, 340.

¹⁴ Powell, North Carolina Through Four Centuries, 216.

Valentine Hollingsworth moved his family from South Carolina to Bladen County, North Carolina.¹⁵

More is known about the early Welsh who migrated to South Carolina in the eighteenth century. Governor Robert Johnson, the royal governor of the province of South Carolina, granted the first Welsh settlers ten thousand acres in northeastern South Carolina that eventually became known as the Welsh Tract.¹⁶ One of the reasons the Welsh received such a large grant of land was perhaps due to Maurice Lewis, a Welshman who was the Chancellor of the Exchequer in South Carolina. Lewis owned 450 acres in Anglesey, Wales and migrated to South Carolina around 1728. His influence among the early Welsh was short-lived; he contracted a fever and died in Charleston in 1739.¹⁷

The early Welsh who settled in the upper Pee Dee in South Carolina were Calvinists who believed in predestination, and became disillusioned by the Arminian practices that included the belief in universal salvation. More than thirty families migrated from Pencader Hundred Baptist Church in Delaware to South Carolina between 1736 and 1746. Some families, particularly the Harry, James and Jones families, were slaveholders and imported their slaves from Delaware to South Carolina. In addition, a distinct Welsh cultural identity prevailed in the upper Pee Dee of South Carolina, at least to 1760.¹⁸

The Baptist Church known as Welsh Neck founded by eight families in 1738 near present day Society Hill, became the mother church of over thirty-five churches on the South Carolina frontier in the eighteenth century. Unlike the Welsh in North Carolina, a more distinct Welsh cultural identity prevailed. In his 1745, visit the Rev. John Fordyce, the SPG minister, described these Baptists as being bilingual since they spoke Welsh and English when they migrated to South Carolina. James James, Esquire, the first leader of the Welsh settlers owned a Welsh Bible. Before building their church at Welsh Neck these early Welsh were using the *Cyd Gordiad* by Abel Morgan in the home of John Jones. The *Cyd Gordiad* was the first and only Welsh Bible published in Philadelphia in 1730. Some of the first settlers also owned Welsh books. Nicholas Rogers at the time of his death in 1760 owned a parcel of Welsh books valued at £ 1-10 s. Mary

¹⁵ Herring, "The Cape Fear Welsh Settlements," 3. Welsh Neck Church Minutes, July 5, 1760, South Caroliniana Library, 5.

¹⁶ Robert Meriwether, *The Expansion of South Carolina* (Kingsport, Tenn.: Southern Publishers, 1940), 94.

¹⁷ J. H. Easterby, ed., *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, November 10, 1736-June 7, 1739*(Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1951), 482.

¹⁸ For a more detailed study of the Welsh in South Carolina see: George Lloyd Johnson, Jr. *The Frontier in the Colonial South; South Carolina Backcountry, 1736-1800*, (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997), 17-36, and 107; hereafter cited as Johnson, *The Frontier in the Colonial South*, 24-25.

Devonald, while writing her will in December 1755, also owned a parcel of Welsh books that she left to her son and daughter.¹⁹

In the early years of settlement, the upper Pee Dee community had a Welsh identity that became known in Charleston and throughout the province of South Carolina. On October 22, 1744, Robert Williams, a planter who resided near Charleston, advertised a reward in the South Carolina Gazette for the capture of a runaway Welsh indentured servant named Thomas Edwards. Williams believed the servant, who spoke bad English, "had gone up the path toward the Welsh Settlement or on board a ship."²⁰ Even earlier, Robert Williams advertised three runaway Welsh indentured servants in the South Carolina Gazette. One of these indentured servants was Jenkin James, who "talks very much Welshy."²¹ Advertisements announcing St. David's Day festivities in Charleston also appeared in the South Carolina Gazette. One advertisement printed in that Charleston newspaper appeared in Welsh announcing the celebration of St. David's Day in that city on March 1, 1771. This announcement in Welsh read:

*Dydd Gwyl Dewi—Mae yr Holt Hen Britaniad a I Hepil, fydd yn Dewi
Ginaua ii guda I, Guridwir ar Dydd Gwyl. Dewi, Yn Dummuno Rei,
Henuan Pump O Dyddian O flaeny Dydd cynta o Faretth Trwy
Orchymmyn Peny Genedl, I William Edwards, igriven Trief siarles y is
Dydd a Chaeffer, 1771.²²*

This society was first organized in Charleston in 1736, and celebrated by local inhabitants of Welsh descent. The coming of the American Revolution could have interrupted this Welsh celebration in 1774, when the Sons of St. David noted in the South Carolina Gazette that they were unable to assemble to celebrate this event.²³

One of the first Welsh settlers to settle in the upper Pee Dee region of South Carolina was William James. He called his 350 acres he obtained through the headlight system in 1738, New Cambria, meaning New Wales. In 1746, there were three settlers, William Hughes, James Price, and Job Edwards who came to South Carolina directly from Wales. But those men appear to have been the only men to migrate directly from Wales to South Carolina in that decade. With the

²⁰ South Carolina Gazette, October 22, 1744.

²¹ South Carolina Gazette, June 16 and 23, 1739.

²² South Carolina Gazette, February 19, 1771. This announcement translated: To all old Britons and their descendants, there will be a St. David's banquet on St. David's Day, and requesting reservations five days ahead of the first of March, I William Edwards on the first day of February, 1771.

²³ South Carolina Gazette, March 6, 1736, February 19, 1771, and March 7, 1774; also see Henning Cohen, ed. The South Carolina Gazette, 1732-1775 (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1953), 20, 24; Johnson, The Frontier in the Colonial South, 24.

exception of these men, there does not appear to have been a direct migration from Wales to the Welsh Tract in South Carolina. Most of the Welsh settlers who migrated to South Carolina were Baptists. These Welsh Baptists kept a distinct cultural identity within their church communities for several years after they settled in South Carolina. In 1759, a membership list of the church members taken at Welsh Neck Church included the names of sixty-five members. Of those members' surnames, only four were of non-Welsh decent, or English and Scottish origin. Those having non-Welsh surnames included such surnames as McDaniel, Desurrency, Poland and Perkins. By 1777, the church members had much more diversity as revealed by the 197 members on the membership list of that year. This ethnic diversity after 1760 can be attributed to the aftermath of the Cherokee War of 1760 that caused more settlers of Scots-Irish descent from Pennsylvania, Virginia and North Carolina to migrate down the Great Wagon Road into South Carolina. The South Carolina census in 1790 revealed that only 6.2 percent of the entire population of that state had Welsh surnames, thus approximately 8, 691 of the total 140, 178 whites living in that state represented about the same proportion of population with Welsh surnames in the other states.²⁴

By the time of the South Carolina Regulator movement in the late 1760s, there were twelve identified Regulators in St. David's Parish. Of that number, only one had a Welsh surname, and that was the Reverend Evan Pugh of Cashaway Baptist Church. By the time of the Revolution, the ethnic heritage of many inhabitants in the upper Pee Dee was not as distinct as it had been during the first twenty-five years of settlement. Throughout the eighteenth century, evidence of a Welsh culture did persist in the upper Pee Dee region of South Carolina. The name of the parish bore the name St. David when it was established in 1767, named in honor of the patron saint of Wales, and the local inhabitants formed a St. David's Society and the St. David's Academy in 1777 to promote learning within the parish. Today, both continue to function. Welsh surnames in this region continue to prevail. A distinct Welsh identity among the congregations in the Baptist churches of the upper Pee Dee in South Carolina never emerged. Yet the Welsh who migrated to South Carolina did make an important imprint on America's cultural heritage. The historian, Alan Conway, has revealed two primary contributions the Welsh made to the American heritage. One contribution included rituals associated with musical practices that became a part of evangelical Christianity. The other is irreligiosity

²⁴ In 1777 some of the diverse surnames on the membership list at Welsh Neck Baptist Church included such surnames as Chambliss, Walden, Cherry, Mason, Hewson, Stinson, White, Pearce, and Winchester; See Johnson, *The Frontier in the Colonial South*, 24; Welsh Neck Church Minutes, 2, South Carolinian Library; South Carolina Colonial Plats, vol. 4, 346 South Carolina Department of Archives and History; South Carolina Council Journal, November 4, 1746, South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 122-24; Thomas L. Purvis, "The Population of the United States, 1790: A Symposium," *William & Mary Quarterly*, vol. XLI (January 1984): 85-102.

associated “with anticlericalism and antidoctrinalism; identified by the legal separation of the church and state that includes the people's rights to be free of religion.”²⁵

With respect to musical practices, Welsh Neck Baptist Church helped to introduce hymn singing into the Baptist churches throughout the South. Also, during the 1770s, the Rev. Evan Pugh operated a Singing School on Saturday mornings at Cashaway Baptist Church. Irreligiosity is reflected in anticlericalism and antidoctrinalism and can be associated with Welsh Neck Church's active role in initiating the movement to disestablish the Anglican Church in South Carolina during the American Revolution. The later event reveals that the Baptist religion the early Welsh settlers brought to South Carolina in the 1730s played an enduring role in the shaping of this community in the upper Pee Dee region of South Carolina.²⁶

In conclusion, the eighteenth century Welsh who migrated from Pennsylvania primarily relocated to the Carolinas for economic and religious reasons. Those who settled in North Carolina were attracted to the British bounty offered in the naval stores industry for the production of tar, pitch, and turpentine. The Welsh who migrated to North Carolina was much more dispersed, and this was perhaps due to their involvement in naval stores, solely dependent on the sap extracted from the Long Leaf Pine. Whereas the Welsh in South Carolina were not as dispersed as those who settled in North Carolina, the Welsh in South Carolina formed a close cohesive community centered around Welsh Neck Baptist Church, founded in 1738 by fifteen Welsh families that became the second center of Baptist influence in South Carolina after Charleston in the eighteenth century. Although more is known about the South Carolina Welsh, the early settlers had a lasting influence in each region and the prevalence of Welsh surnames such as James, Jones, Williams, Davis Edwards, Lucas, Morgan, Reese, Wilds, and many more is a lasting testament to their legacy in the Carolinas.

²⁵ Johnson, *The Frontier in the Colonial South*, 24-25; Samuel S. Hill, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer Univ. Press, 1984), 823-24; Alan Conway, ed., *The Welsh in America: Letters From the Immigrants* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1961), 127-28.

²⁶ Johnson, *The Frontier in the Colonial South*, 25, 151-52.