

# The North Carolina Booklet.

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GREAT EVENTS IN .....  
NORTH CAROLINA HISTORY.



## Betsy Dowdy's Ride,

*September*

—BY—

COL. R. B. CREECY.



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# *NORTH CAROLINA BOOKLET.*

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## THE LEGEND OF BETSY DOWDY

AN HISTORICAL TRADITION OF THE BATTLE OF  
GREAT BRIDGE.

BY

COL. R. B. CREECY.

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1901.

**“Carolina! Carolina! Heaven’s blessings attend her!  
While we live we will cherish, protect and defend her.”**

# THE LEGEND OF BETSEY DOWDY.

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## AN HISTORICAL TRADITION OF THE BATTLE OF GREAT BRIDGE.

The winter of 1775 was a dark and gloomy time for the Revolutionary Patriots of Eastern Carolina. Governor Tryon had left his "Palace" in New Bern secretly and hurriedly, had taken refuge on board the armed "Cruizer" and was stationed at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, issuing orders, fortifying the Tory feeling in the Colony, and inciting the slaves to servile insurrection. Lord Dunmore had been driven from Williamsburg, Va., by popular indignation, had gone down to Norfolk, Va., and intrenched himself there. From this position he was annoying the adjacent sections of Virginia by hostile raids, and was expected to make incursions into the adjacent sections of North Carolina. The death of John Harvey, of Perquimans county, in June, 1775, had cast a gloom over the Colony, and especially over the northern counties, where his patriotism and manly virtues were best known. But the fires of liberty were kept burning.

Dunmore, with a few regulars, who had accompanied him in his flight from Williamsburg, Va., had ravaged Suffolk and some other places, and was preparing to extend his ravages to the Albemarle section of Carolina. Our leading men were on the alert, and couriers were keeping them in close touch. John Harvey, of Perquimans, had

joined his fathers across the great divide, but his mantle had fallen upon his kinsman and connection by marriage, General William Skinner, of Yoepim Creek, Perquimans county, North Carolina, and he was watching every movement of Dunmore. Colonel Isaac Gregory, of Camden, was hurrying with a small militia force to join our Colonel Robert Howe, and met the enemy at Great Bridge in Virginia. Thomas Benbury, of Chowan county, then Speaker in the lower house of the General Assembly, had left his luxurious home at "Benbury Hall" that overlooked Albemarle Sound, and was hurrying to join the troops under Howe with commissary stores. Excitement ran high, and the expected invasion of the Albemarle counties, and the probable collision at Great Bridge, where Dunmore was intrenched, was the universal subject of conversation. Howe was pushing by forced marches to the aid of Virginia with some regulars, and the Hertford county militia, under Colonel Wynns of that county. Public expectation was on tiptoe.

Joe Dowdy and old man Sammy Jarvis lived on the "Banks" opposite Knotts Island. They were near neighbors and intimate friends. Early in December, 1775, Jarvis went over to the "Main" to hear news of Colonel Howe's movements toward Great Bridge. When he returned home, late in the evening, he was greatly excited. He was impressed with the dangerous situation of the dwellers by the sea. He was constantly saying, "Dunmore and them blamed Britishers will come down the coast from Norfolk and steal all our Banks pony stock, and burn our houses, ding 'em." After a short rest and a hasty bite of supper,

old man Jarvis went over to Dowdy's to tell him the news. Dowdy was a wrecker for the money that was in it, and a fisher for the food that was in it. He had grown rich by wrecking. He was always watching the sea. He was a devout man, always prayed for the safety of the poor sailor, who was exposed to the perils of the deep, and always closed with a silent supplication that if there should be a wreck, it might be on the Currituck beach. He had prospered in the business of a wrecker, had saved many lives, and much wreckage and money. His visible store of chattels was beef cattle and banker ponies. He herded them by the hundred. Sammy Jarvis came in without ceremony, and was cordially received. "Well, Uncle Sammy," said Dowdy, "what are the news; tell us all." "Well, Joseph," said Jarvis, "things is fogerty, Gregory, Colonel Isaac is hurrying up his Camden milish to join Howe, and Thomas Benbury, of Chowan, is pushing on his wagons of commissaries. If they don't reach Great Bridge in time to bear a hand in the fight, they'll hurry on to Norfolk and drive Dunmore out of the old town. But if Dunmore beats our folks at Great Bridge, then our goose is cooked, and our property all gone, all the gold and goods saved in our hard life work, and all our cattle and marsh ponies." "You don't tell me so," said Dowdy. "Yes, it's so, just as sure as "old \* Tom." The only thing can save us is General William Skinner, of Perquimans, and the militia, and he is too far away. We can't get word to him in time." As Jarvis said these words slowly and with emphasis, Betsy Dowdy, Joe Dowdy's young and pretty daughter, who was

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\* Thomas Benbury, of Chowan county.



present with the family, said: "Uncle Sammy, do you say the Britishers will come and steal away all of our ponies?" "Yes," said he. "And my black Bess, too?" "Yes," he answered. She replied: "I'd knock 'em in the head with a conch shell first." Betsy soon left the room. She went to the herding pen, and "Black Bess" was not there. She went to the marsh and called aloud: "Bess! Bessie! Black Beauty." The pretty pony heard the old familiar voice, and came to the call. Betsy took her by her silken mane, led her to the shelter, went into the house, brought out a blanket and also a small pouch of coin. She placed the blanket on the round back of the pony, sprang into the soft seat, and galloped over the hills and far away on her perilous journey. Down the beach she went, "Black Bess" doing her accustomed work. She reached the point opposite Church's Island, dashed into the shallow ford of Currituck Sound, and reached the shore of the Island. On they sped, "Black Bess" gaining new impulse from every kind and gentle word of her rider.

"Bessie, pretty Bess, my black, sleek, beauty, the British thieves shan't have you. We are going after General William Skinner and his milish!! They'll beat me off of you." She almost sang to the docile pony as they went on their journey. Through the divide, on through Camden, the twinkling stars her only light, over Lamb's old ferry, into Pasquotank, by the "narrows" (now Elizabeth City), to Hartsford's ford, up the Highlands of Perquimans, on to Yoepim Creek, and General William Skinner's hospitable home was reached. The morning sun was gilding the tree tops when she entered the gate. She was hospitably wel-



comed, and when she briefly told the story of coming, cordial kindness followed.

The General's daughters, the toast of the Albemarle, Dolly, Penelope, and Lavinia, made her at home. General Skinner listened to her tale of danger, and promised assistance. Mid-day came and with it Betsy's kind farewell. Filial duty bade her, and she hied her home. As she neared her sea girt shore the notes of Victory were in the air.

"They are beaten, beaten, the British are beaten at Great Bridge." The reports materialized as she went. The battle of Great Bridge had been fought and won.

Howe had assumed command of the Virginia and Carolina troops upon his arrival and was in hot pursuit of Dunmore towards Norfolk, where, after a short resistance, Norfolk was evacuated by the British Troops, who sought refuge on board their ships, where, after a few cannon shots into the town, they departed for parts unknown.

Then and long after by bivouac and campfire and in patriotic homes was told the story of Betsy Dowdy's Ride.



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