

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



ALEXANDER CHESNEY (1755 - 1843): Veteran of the American War of Independence

When the War of Independence broke out in 1775 those pioneer Ulster Scots settlers, unlike the English settlers, had no qualms about rebelling against the Crown Forces. They remembered how the English landlords had treated them in their native land; their independent streak and hatred of aristocratic landlords still smoldered within them. One writer quite rightly described it as a Presbyterian conspiracy for independence, while a red coat captain called it a Scots-Irish Presbyterian rebellion. One of the Ballymena's most famous sons who found himself in the thick of battle was Alexander Chesney.

As I reside near the town land of Dunclug that was Chesney's birthplace, I recently requested that Ballymena Borough Council should consider erecting a plaque in memory of him. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact spot of his birth as this area was made from small farmsteads at that time; today it is a residential area consisting of two large housing estates, two schools and the recently erected north Ballymena Educational and Recreation Centre. We know that Chesney was born on 16 September 1755 and that the family of eight children accompanied by both parents emigrated to south Carolina on 25 August 1772. Their youngest child, a girl of eight, died of smallpox on the voyage. They settled for a short time at Jackson's Creek. Here Alexander married Margaret Hodges also from Ballymena and soon enlisted in the American Army where he served from 1776 until 1779. After the surrender of Charleston to the British forces in May 1780 Chesney joined the British Loyalist Militia where he attained the rank of captain. In October of that year a great British defeat took place at King's Mountain and Captain Chesney was among those taken prisoner. Although severely wounded in the knee he and his fellow prisoners were forced to march to Gilbertstown where a number of them were executed. Chesney made a daring escape with two of his cousins. The three men hid in a cave near his home and were supplied with food and news of the war by their wives. Here they remained for several weeks, until the British victory at Blackstall Hill.

Alexander Chesney's first wife died in 1781. He continued to serve the Loyalist cause until in January 1782 when he was forced to resign owing to ill health. He sailed to Ireland from Charleston in April and arrived at Castle Haven, Ireland in May and travelled to Dublin where he was forced to

sell his few belongings and walked to Ballymena. He arrived destitute, but after a period of rest obtained a temporary job. He married a second time to another Ballymena lady called Jane Wilson. Good fortune came his way when he was offered a post as Revenue Officer at Annalong, Co. Down; here he remained and reared a family of eleven. Chesney was certainly a man of action for in January 1797 he received a commission to raise a yeomanry corps in which he served until August 1798 the year of the United Irishmen's rebellion. This was followed by a period of a coastguard at the well-known smugglers' cove named Wrack Port, Annalong.

One of Chesney's children was Francis Rawdon Chesney who explored and mapped the Euphrates, the Tigris and the Karum and suggested the route of the Suez Canal and for that was named the "Father of the Suez Canal" by the builder Ferdinand de Lesseps

By James McIlhatton, Ballymena