

Our
Patriots

'OLD KINGS MOUNTAIN'

*Isaac Shelby served America in two wars and
shepherded Kentucky through statehood and its early years.*

— By Jeff Walter —

Isaac Shelby

On an autumn day in 1780, a group of buckskin-clad Patriots mustered near modern-day Elizabethton, Tenn., crossed the Appalachian Mountains and boldly attacked and defeated British forces led by the celebrated Major Patrick Ferguson at Kings Mountain.

This event was, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, “the turn of the tide of success” in the Revolution, and a key leader in the pivotal but often-overlooked battle was Colonel Isaac Shelby.

Had Shelby accomplished little else in his lifetime, his accomplishments in the Carolinas would have secured his place in American history. But the onetime surveyor also went on to help lay the foundation for the state of Kentucky and serve twice as its governor; fight in the War of 1812; and help Andrew Jackson negotiate treaties with American Indians.

Early Life

Isaac Shelby was born December 11, 1750, to Evan and Letitia Cox Shelby near Hagerstown, Md. Evan had emigrated from his native Wales with his father’s family around 1735, when he was about 15. The elder Shelby, a woodsman, hunter and trader, distinguished himself as a lieutenant and then a captain during the French and Indian War, and in later actions with the help of his son.

The younger Shelby received a basic education in rural schools. He spent part of 1771 feeding and herding cattle, and around that time his family moved to the Holston region on Virginia’s western frontier.

In 1774, he was commissioned as a lieutenant in the militia, amid increasing American Indian unrest. On October 10, 1774, he served as a lieutenant in his father’s company during the Battle of Point Pleasant, the major conflict in Lord Dunmore’s War, which Virginia’s royal governor had waged against the Shawnee and Mingo tribes.

For nearly a year after this military action, Isaac Shelby worked as a surveyor, exploring the Kentucky wilderness for the Transylvania Company.

The Revolutionary War

In 1776, Shelby was commissioned a captain of a minuteman company, and in 1777 and 1778 he was a commissary of supplies for the Continental Army, overseeing deliveries to frontier posts.

When his father led troops against the Chickamauga American Indians in 1779, Shelby pledged his own credit to provide supplies. That year he became a member of the Virginia legislature. In 1780, while on a surveying trip to the Kentucky territory to finalize claims he had staked five years earlier, he received news of Charleston’s surrender to the British—the latest in a string of humiliating Colonial losses. Yet another British victory followed at Camden, S.C.

Shelby returned home, determined to join the Patriots’ fight for as long as it took to gain independence. There he found an urgent message from Colonel Charles McDowell calling on him to help halt the British advances in the war’s Southern campaign. Within days, Shelby joined McDowell with 200 mounted riflemen, who were called the Overmountain Men because their settlements lay west of the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia, North Carolina and today’s Tennessee.

On July 30, 1780, Shelby, with about 600 troops, captured Fort Thicketty (also known as Fort Anderson) in South Carolina, forcing the surrender of Loyalist Captain Patrick Moore without firing a shot. Just over a week later, on August 8, Shelby and his men fought in the Battle of Cedar Springs. And on August 18 at Musgrove Mill—despite being outnumbered 500 to 200—they forced the British to retreat from their encampment on the Enoree River. This was accomplished using breastworks hastily constructed of logs and brush by the Overmountain Men on Shelby’s orders.

But it was at Kings Mountain, near the North Carolina/South Carolina border, that Isaac Shelby had his greatest military triumph. Major Patrick Ferguson, a highly distinguished British army officer, had been aggressively recruiting Loyalists to protect the flank of Lord Charles Cornwallis’ main force. Shelby and Colonel John Sevier planned a raid on Ferguson and his men.

Joined by troops led by colonels William Campbell, Benjamin Cleveland and McDowell and Major Joseph Winston, they pursued Ferguson and his men to Kings Mountain, where the British troops dug in and fortified their position. The arrogant Ferguson didn’t see himself as cornered: He picked the hilltop spot because he believed it would be difficult to attack such high ground. According to *Isaac Shelby: Kentucky’s First Governor and Hero of Three Wars* by Sylvia Wrobel and George Grider (Cumberland Press, 1974), Ferguson declared that “God Almighty and all the rebels out of hell” would not move him.

A Rallying Cry

“When we encounter the enemy, don’t wait for the word of command. Let each one of you be your own officer, and do the very best you can, taking every care you can of yourselves, and availing yourselves of every advantage that chance may throw in your way. If in the woods, shelter yourselves, and give them Indian play; advance from tree to tree, pressing the enemy and killing and disabling all you can. Your officers will shrink from no danger—they will be constantly with you, and the moment the enemy give way, be on the alert, and strictly obey orders.”

—Isaac Shelby to his men at Kings Mountain, as recalled by John Spelts, a survivor of the battle, quoted in *King’s Mountain and Its Heroes*, by Lyman C. Draper (originally published in Cincinnati in 1881; reprinted by Genealogical Publishing Co., Baltimore, in 1967)

Even though he knew he was being surrounded, Ferguson wasn’t expecting the ferocity of the Americans’ attack on October 7, 1780. Shelby instructed his men to use a tactic he had learned in his clashes against the American Indians: Move from tree to tree, firing from behind each. Despite repeated bayonet charges by Ferguson’s men, the Patriots eventually forced the British to retreat. As they fled, Ferguson was killed, and his men surrendered.

After this battle, Shelby’s men began calling him “Old Kings Mountain” for his role in a victory that paved the way for the Patriots’ defeat of the British troops under Cornwallis.

Politics and the War of 1812

In 1782, while still serving in the Army, Shelby was elected to the North Carolina legislature, and that winter he was appointed to a commission to adjust land claims along the Cumberland River. On April 19, 1783, he married Susannah Hart at Boonesborough, Ky., and later that year they moved to land in Lincoln County, Ky., that had been awarded to him for his military service. Over the next several years, he was involved in various negotiations with American Indians, including a temporary peace agreement forged with the Chickamauga in the summer of 1791.

Shelby participated in several of the conventions leading to statehood for Kentucky, including those that secured its separation from Virginia and the one in April 1792 that formed Kentucky’s first constitution. On May 17 of that year, electors unanimously chose him as the first governor. He took office June 4, three days after Kentucky officially became the 15th state.

During his first term, his most notable accomplishments were supplying troops to curb the American Indian threat in

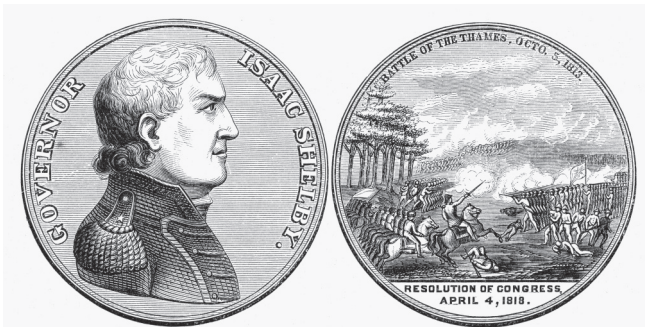
the northwest; securing the use of the Mississippi River; and establishing a tax structure and basic laws.

After leaving office in June 1796, Shelby spent 16 years developing his land holdings and amassing a fortune. But when the War of 1812 began, he heeded the public’s call to run for governor again. Still wildly popular because of his military service, he defeated his opponent by a margin of nearly 3-to-1, and took office August 24, 1812.

The war dominated Shelby’s second administration. In 1813, he raised 3,500 troops, twice as many as requested, and personally led them to join General William Henry Harrison’s army. On October 5 of that year, at age 62, Governor Shelby actively participated in the Battle of the Thames in Ontario, Canada, a decisive American victory over the British and American Indians that solidified U.S. control over the northwest.

After his second gubernatorial term ended in September 1816, Shelby declined an offer from President James Monroe to become Secretary of War, citing his age. He performed one final act of public service when he and Andrew Jackson negotiated with the Chickasaw American Indians to purchase an area west of the Tennessee River that became known as the Jackson Purchase region of Kentucky.

Shelby died at his farm, Traveller’s Rest, south of Danville, Ky., on July 18, 1826. 🕊



An engraving of a medallion commemorating Isaac Shelby and the victory at the Battle of the Thames during the War of 1812