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Old Hickory

From Waxhaw to Washington, Andrew Jackson's concept of duty, of honor, and of country still inspires us.

Andrew Jackson's parents followed "The Great Waggon Road" which extended from Philadelphia, across the Potomac, and beyond the Blue Ridge to the Carolina highlands, where it became Catawba Traders' Path. Here the seventh president of the United States was born, on the banks of Crawford's Branch of Waxhaw Creek near Lancaster, South Carolina, in 1767, the child of newly arrived Northern Irish immigrants. The boy's father, a tenant farmer from County Antrim, had died before he was born.

Andrew grew, freckled and quick-tempered, and studied reading, writing, grammar, and geography at Waxhaw Church. Further schooling was deferred, however, for at thirteen he enlisted as a mounted orderly for service in the Revolutionary War. His long military career began in a skirmish at Hanging Rock, near Heath Springs. A British raiding party soon captured him and his brother, and imprisoned them here at Camden, where Andrew refused the order of a British officer to polish his boots. Young Jackson claimed right of refusal as a prisoner of war and the angry officer struck him with his saber, marking him for life — a badge of honor. During his incarceration Jackson witnessed the fight on Hobkirk Hill by peering through the high wall of the stockade.

Andrew's brother Robert died soon after their release from prison, and his mother too died shortly after. Jackson recalled later that he felt utterly alone. But his strength of character enabled him to emerge from loneliness to rowdiness — horse racing, game-cocking, and card playing. But his ambition was extraordinary. He began to study law and was admitted to the bar in Salisbury, North Carolina. He migrated westward, across the Appalachians to the region which would become Tennessee. He helped draft that state's constitution and became its single member in the House of Representatives. He served in the US Senate and sat as a judge on the Tennessee Supreme Court. Elected a Major General in the Tennessee Militia, he defeated the Creek Indians, allies of the British, at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Commissioned a Major General, US Army, he captured Spanish Florida and was assigned to defend New Orleans. There he repulsed an attempted British invasion by a large force of veteran regulars, for which he became a national hero. He added to his fame by quelling a Seminole Indian rebellion and, in 1821, he was appointed Military Governor of the Florida Territory. By then a national figure, he ran unsuccessfully as the Democratic candidate for president in 1824, but he persisted and was elected in 1828, and reelected in 1832.

Jackson was simple and forthright, refusing to compromise or to equivocate. He expressed himself well, reinforced by knowledge of the Bible and of Shakespeare. At sixty-one, President-elect Jackson stood more than six feet tall, ramrod straight, and slim. A stand-out in any crowd, his eyes were piercing as a hawk's, his lean face seamed by the saber scar which lost itself in a mane of thick gray hair. He arrived in Washington, however, saddened by the loss of his wife, Rachel, and suffering from chronic illness. He carried two bullets in his body which affected his system as a poison. But despite adversity, he proved in his person that a man born in a log cabin could amass wealth, assume military command and lead successfully, and win election to and administer the great power of the Presidency of the United States.

Jackson greatly appealed to the American imagination. His administration, which introduced the spoils system, witnessed: scandal, which broke up his cabinet; the overthrow of the United States Bank, by Presidential veto of its charter and by withdrawal of government funds from deposit; opposition to the Calhoun doctrine of states rights and the South Carolina nullification issue; and complete payment of the national debt.

Andrew Jackson retired to the Hermitage, his Tennessee home, and lived out his life there, despised by some, revered by many. A frontiersman, he was dignified, courteous, and a gentleman. Noted for his staunchness and strength of character, he was first called "tough," from his great powers of endurance, then "tough as hickory," and lastly, "Old Hickory."

Old Hickory's legacy is for each of us. He was born and brought up close to Camden. Great moments in his life and in American history transpired nearby. His concept of duty, of honor, and of country still inspire us. And here, the setting, the purpose, and the experience of Camden Military Academy combine to distill his same sort of spirit in cadets today. Andrew Jackson's own words, published here, hold real meaning for each of us.

