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MASSACRE AT WAXHAWS: THE EVIDENCE FROM WOUNDS

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INTRODUCTION

Early in 1780 with almost the entire Virginia Continental Army surrounded at Charleston SC, Virginia hastily recruited some 350 soldiers to be sent as reinforcements. These troops, called the Third Virginia Detachment and attached to Gen. Charles Scott's Second Continental Brigade, assembled at Petersburg under Col. Abraham Buford. On March 29 the detachment marched South, getting as far as Leneud's Ferry on Santee River, where they learned that Charleston had surrendered. On May 14 Buford began retracing his steps, and at Waxhaws settlement near the North Carolina line on 29 May 1780 he was overtaken by the legion of Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton comprising about 270 dragoons and infantrymen riding double. After rejecting Tarleton's demand that he surrender, Buford bungled the defense. What happened next is succinctly described by Tarleton, himself:

Slaughter was commenced before Lieutenant-colonel Tarleton could remount another horse, the one with which he led his dragoons being overturned by the volley. Thus in a few minutes ended an affair which might have had a very different termination.... The loss of officers and men was great on the part of the Americans, owing to the dragoons so effectually breaking the infantry, and to a report amongst the cavalry, that they had lost their commanding officer, which stimulated the soldiers to a vindictive asperity not easily restrained.... Upwards of one hundred officers and men were killed on the spot..., and above two hundred prisoners... fell into the possession of the victors.

Word of the slaughter quickly spread, and "Tarleton's quarter" became an American battle cry. Since then

few have doubted that the Battle of Waxhaws was a massacre until relatively recently. In 2002 Thomas A. Rider II produced an MA Thesis that argued that any resemblance to a massacre was due to a few British soldiers, Buford's ineptitude, and the continued resistance by American infantry against British cavalry.

That a few British soldiers cut Americans down without justification or bayoneted the wounded is undeniable. However, the intensity of the combat, the confusion produced by the breaking of the American line, the predominantly close-quarters fighting that ensued, and the continued resistance of Continental soldiers all contributed to the carnage.

More recently, Jim Piecuch has also labeled the massacre story as a myth, stating that the slaughter was the work of "a few Legion soldiers [who] executed a handful of surrendering Americans" exaggerated by unreliable sources writing long after (Piecuch 2004, 2010; Piecuch and Lynch 2013).

Rider's thesis and Piecuch's 2004 paper were written at a time when it was difficult to access the testimony of the most reliable source of information – the soldiers who were there. Since then the pension and bounty-land applications of 134 Waxhaws survivors, as well as more than 40 widows and heirs, have been transcribed and posted at revwarapps.org. Relevant excerpts of their declarations are compiled at <http://revwarapps.org/b221.pdf>. Moreover, the applications of more than 20,000 other soldiers who served from or in the South have been posted, making it possible in only a few days to compare Waxhaws with other battles. The applications include details about wounds, which are especially convincing evidence, because scars bear witness long after memories have faded.

The objective of this paper is to compare the wounds received at Waxhaws with those from other battles to answer two specific questions relevant to whether the Battle of Waxhaws was a massacre:

- 1) Were sword attacks on unarmed Americans more common at Waxhaws than at other battles?
- 2) Were Americans at Waxhaws more often wounded by both swords and bayonets than at other battles?

WERE SWORD ATTACKS ON UNARMED AMERICANS MORE COMMON AT WAXHAWS?

Because people instinctively parry blows with muskets or other solid objects in preference to arms and hands, wounds to arms and hands are generally considered to be evidence of an attack on an unarmed person. I therefore determined whether sword wounds to arms and hands were more common at Waxhaws than at other battles by searching the transcribed applications for the words sword, saber, sabre, broadsword, cutlass, cut, slash, or hack and distinguishing where on the body the wounds occurred. I found five battles at which at least five applicants described sword wounds and their locations: Waxhaws, SC (29 May 1780),

Camden, SC (16 August 1780), Cowpens, SC (17 January 1781), Guilford Courthouse, NC (15 March 1781), and Eutaw Springs, SC (8 September 1781). Tarleton’s British Legion was present at the first four of these battles. Like Waxhaws, Camden was a decisive American defeat, and Guilford Courthouse was nominally an American defeat. At Cowpens Tarleton was defeated, and Eutaw Springs could be described as a draw. All other engagements were combined to form a control group with which to compare each of the five named battles.

Of pension and bounty-land applicants who reported sword wounds at Waxhaws and described their locations, 59% reported wounds to arms or hands (Table 1). Waxhaws was the only battle in which the proportion of sword wounds to arms and hands was significantly greater than at other battles. With a P value of 0.03 there is only a 3% probability that the difference between Waxhaws and other battles was due to random variations in the data. These results are essentially the same as in a previous study published before the addition of six new applications found in the Library of Virginia (Harris 2014).

TABLE 1. Sword wounds to arms or hands at five named battles compared with those received at other battles. Numbers of applicants reporting sword wounds not to arms or hands, numbers reporting sword wounds to arms or hands, total number reporting locations of sword wounds, percentage reporting sword wounds to arm or hands, and the probability P that the difference from other battles is due to random variation in data. The P value is calculated using Fisher’s Exact Test, one-tailed for the Battle of Waxhaws and two tailed for others. By convention a P of less than 0.05 is taken to indicate a statistically significant difference.

Engagement	Sword wound not to arm or hand	Sword wound to arm or hand	Total with sword wounds	% Sword wound to arm or hand	P
Waxhaws	13	19	32	59	0.03
Camden	5	7	12	58	0.22
Cowpens	15	8	23	35	1.00
Guilford CH	10	4	14	29	0.56
Eutaw Springs	6	8	14	56	0.24
Other battles	49	30	79	40	
Totals	98	76	174	44	

These results indicate that Waxhaws was the only battle in which the proportion of sword wounds to arms or hands was greater than expected, with 59% receiving such wounds. The proportion at the battles of Camden and Eutaw Springs were also numerically high, but the numbers were too small to be statistically significant. These results suggest that a large proportion of Buford’s soldiers were unarmed when Tarleton’s dragoons attacked them.

WERE BAYONET ATTACKS ON WOUNDED AMERICANS MORE COMMON AT WAXHAWS?

Since dragoons used swords and infantrymen used bayonets, wounds inflicted on one person with both weapons indicate two separate attacks, one of which was on someone who had already been wounded. At Waxhaws the sword wounds would have been inflicted first, because mounted swordsmen were faster, and they could not have reached a man who was already on the ground. In order to determine the proportion of Americans wounded by both swords and bayonets I searched the transcribed pension and bounty-land applications for the same terms as in the previous study, including those who did not indicate the location of the wound on the body. I then determined whether the applicant also reported a bayonet wound at the same battle.

The results show that wounds by both sword and bayonet were significantly more common at only two battles: Waxhaws and Eutaw Springs (Table 2). More than half the applicants who reported sword wounds at the battle of Waxhaws also reported bayonet wounds, with a probability of only 3 in a billion that this proportion differed from other battles merely by random variation in data. The Battle of Waxhaws accounted for more than half all applicants who reported wounds by both sword and bayonet.

It is noteworthy that 43% of applicants with sword wounds from the Battle of Eutaw Springs also reported bayonet wounds. Eutaw Springs is the only one of the five named battles where Tarleton was not present, and it is not usually considered to have devolved into a massacre.

TABLE 2. Sword and bayonet wounds at five named battles compared with other battles. Numbers of applicants reporting sword wounds to any part of the body but not bayonet wounds, numbers reporting sword wounds to any part of the body and also bayonet wounds, total numbers reporting sword wounds to any part of the body, percentage reporting both sword and bayonet wounds, and the probability P that the difference is due to random variation in data. The P value is calculated using Fisher’s Exact Test, one-tailed for the Battle of Waxhaws and two tailed for others (with a maximum set at 1.0).

Engagement	With sword but not bayonet wounds	With both sword and bayonet wounds	Total with sword wounds	Percentage with both sword and bayonet wounds	P
Waxhaws	15	17	32	53	3×10^{-9}
Camden	9	0	9	0	1.0
Cowpens	17	1	18	6	1.0
Guilford CH	14	0	14	0	1.0
Eutaw Springs	8	6	14	43	0.0006
Other battles	101	5	106	5	
Totals	164	29	193	15	

These results indicate that at the Battle of Waxhaws the proportion of applicants wounded by both swords and bayonets was higher than at any other battle, with more than half the applicants reporting both kinds of wounds. These results suggest that a large proportion of Buford’s soldiers were already wounded by Tarleton’s dragoons when they were attacked by his infantry.

CONCLUSION FROM THESE RESULTS

The picture that emerges from these two analyses is that Tarleton's dragoons first charged into the Americans after most had laid down their muskets, and then Tarleton's infantry attacked them with bayonets. Contrary to the conclusions of Rider and Piecuch, more than a few of Tarleton's troops must have been responsible for the killing and wounding of some 300 men in only a few minutes. Comparison with other battles shows that the carnage was not the usual outcome of battles between cavalry and infantry, and that more than half of the wounded Americans were unarmed and incapable of resisting.

Was it a massacre? In the pension and bounty-land applications given from 10 to 60 years later, only two of the 134 survivors used the term "massacre," as did two military surgeons who attended the wounded (William Crayton VAS1744; William King S38121; James R. Alexander W2901; Wilson Cary Selden S4815). On the other hand, it is difficult to read so many accounts of suffering without the word "massacre" coming to mind.

Merriam-Webster.com defines massacre as "the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty." There are three elements involved: the number of victims, whether their killing was cruel or atrocious, and whether they were helpless or unresisting. In my view all three elements were present at the Battle of Waxhaws.

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There is no argument that a large number of Americans were killed outright at the Battle of Waxhaws. There is no way of knowing whether they were killed cruelly or atrociously, but a reading of the applications of survivors leaves little doubt in that regard. Samuel Gilmoore (VAS391), for example, related that he received "twenty-two wounds from the enemy, most of which were with the broad sword, several of them so split and fractured my head that there was five pieces of my skull bone taken out before I was Cured and my Right hand severely cut off where the fingers joined to the hand... after I was no longer able to stand and defend myself and Country, laying wilting in my blood I received three stabs with a bayonet in the joint of my hip, the effects of which I now begin very sensibly to feel; I was taken and kept as a prisoner at the place where the battle was fought for three weeks without ever having a Surgent [surgeon] to dress my Wounds or any other person but by Five of my fellow Sufferers who was nearly in the same Condition." While searching the applications for this study I did not come across any other battle in which survivors described such cruel and atrocious treatment.

The data presented in this study confirm the third element. A large proportion of the Americans were wounded on arms and hands, indicating that they had grounded their arms and were not resisting, and a large proportion had already been rendered helpless by swords before they were bayoneted.

C. Leon Harris is a retired Professor of Biology and *SCAR* Fellow. He is an avid author of scientific articles, a textbook, a novel, and Revolutionary War history. He has contributed articles to *SCAR*; transcribed, annotated, and shared thousands of Revolutionary War soldiers' pension files and muster rolls at revwarapps.org; and researched battlefields in South Carolina's Lowcountry. Leon lives with his wife in the summers in Vermont and winters in Mt. Pleasant, SC.