



Rice and Retaliation: Gen. Francis Marion's Ambuscade Near Parker's Ferry, August 30, 1781

C. Leon Harris and Charles B. Baxley

One of the greatest outrages of the Revolutionary War was the hanging of Patriot Colonel Isaac Hayne in Charlestown, South Carolina on August 4, 1781. The Patriots wanted revenge. Less than a month later, a mile west of a crossing of Edisto River known as Parker's Ferry, the chance for retaliation fell to Brigadier General Francis Marion. Marion had been sent to deal with British plunderers of rice plantations, and one of the plunderers happened to be Major Thomas Fraser, the man who had captured Hayne.

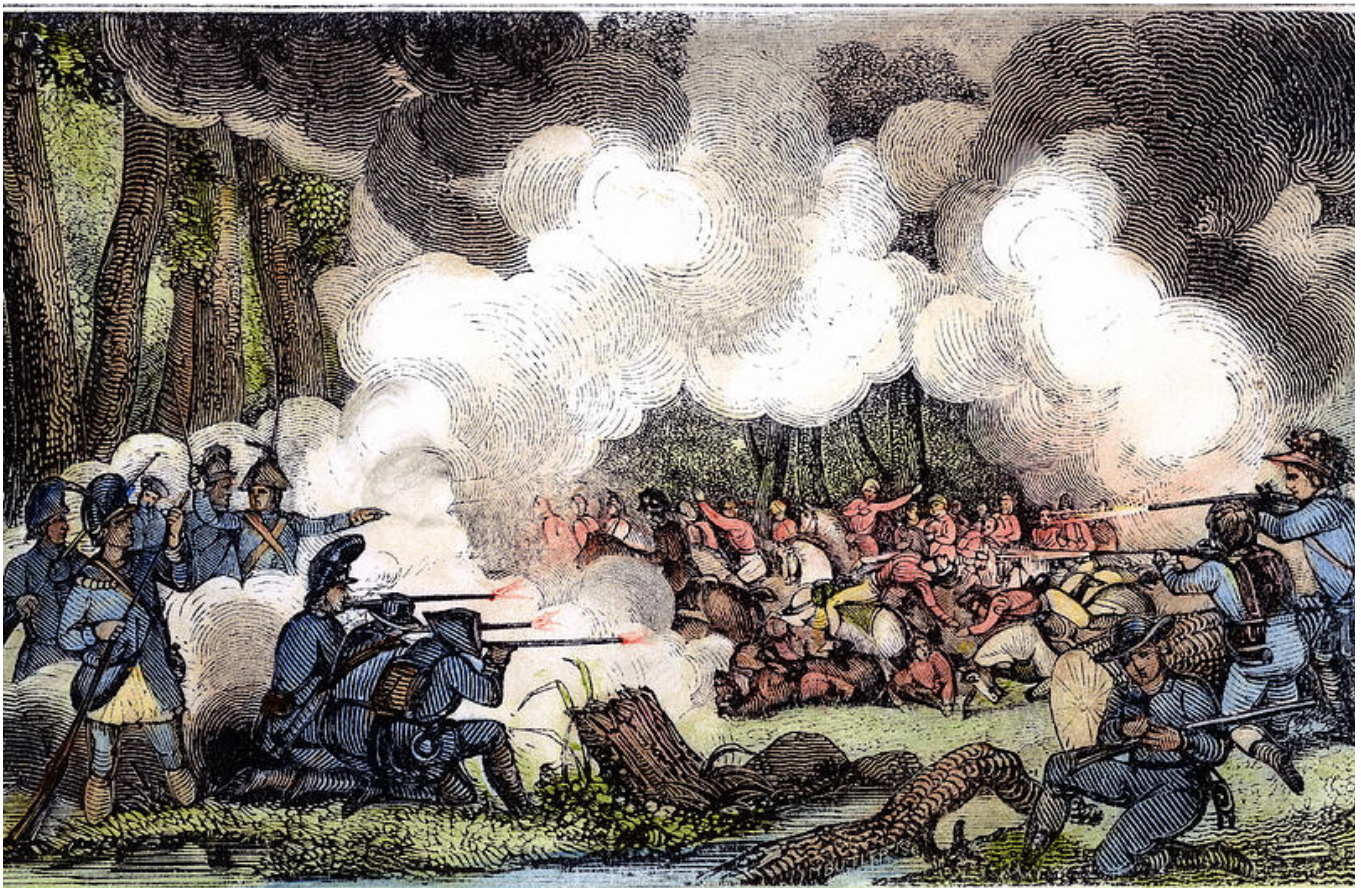


Figure 1. Marion's ambush of Maj. Thomas Fraser at Parker's Ferry.¹ Marion's troops were not dressed in blue, but rather in ordinary hunting garb.

¹ Colored version of an illustration in *The Life of Francis Marion* by William Gilmore Simms, (New York: Henry G. Langley, 1845), facing page 266.

South Carolina in August 1780

The story of Marion's ambush near Parker's Ferry begins on May 12, 1780 with the surrender of Charlestown (now Charleston). Virtually the entire Continental Army of the South was imprisoned, and South Carolina militiamen were sent home on parole. Parole was a serious matter for everyone concerned. American parolees pledged not to do anything to aid the rebellion, in exchange for which they would be secure "from being molested in their property by the British troops."² It was a convenient arrangement for both sides, since neither would have to expend resources on prisoners. Violation of parole would result in the parolee being confined or even executed by the British, and possibly being court martialed by the Americans.

In June of 1780, General Sir Henry Clinton, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army of North America, left Charlestown for New York confident that South Carolina was once more and forever a British colony. Not content with mere victory, however, Clinton issued several ambiguous proclamations, including one stating that "it is become unnecessary that such paroles should be any longer observed; and proper that all persons should take an active part in settling and securing His Majesty's government."³ Many militiamen considered this an abrogation of the terms of capitulation and took up arms again to resist the British occupation. British forces no longer protected Whigs from their Tory neighbors, and the Revolutionary War in South Carolina devolved into a civil war.

Andrew Williamson and Isaac Hayne

Two militia leaders on parole were Andrew Williamson and Isaac Hayne, whose fates

became entangled with fatal consequences for one of them. Williamson, an illiterate Scotsman, had risen to the rank of general in the patriot militia. He not only took parole but gave intelligence to the British, and he is still sometimes called the "Benedict Arnold of the South." Williamson might actually have been a double agent. If so, he was so good at it that not even the best minds have been able to determine his true loyalty, if he had any.⁴ After the war South Carolina intended to confiscate his property, but Gen. Nathanael Greene, commander of the southern army, interceded, stating that Williamson had provided him with valuable information during the war.

Isaac Hayne also accepted parole from the British, and like Williamson, he declared allegiance to the King, but under very different circumstances. Hayne had played relatively minor roles as a captain of militia. His main contribution to the rebellion was as a partner with Col. William Hill in managing Hill's Iron Works, which had supplied much of the artillery in the defense of Charlestown. Hayne was not captured at the surrender of Charlestown and was therefore not formally paroled, but he attempted to remain neutral on his plantation, Hayne Hall, 30 miles west of Charlestown. (Fig. 2) In the summer following the surrender of Charlestown, Hayne was compelled to go to Charlestown to seek medical attention for his wife and children suffering from small pox. While there the British commandant demanded that he declare allegiance to the King or be imprisoned. Faced with the choice of betraying the Patriot cause or abandoning his distressed family, Hayne reluctantly signed the oath of allegiance. Soon after his return to Hayne Hall, his wife died.⁵

² Carl P. Borick, *A Gallant Defense* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 248.

³ Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781, in the Southern Provinces of North America*, (Dublin: Colles et al., 1787), 75-78.

⁴ Conner Runyan, "The Monument That Never Was," *Journal of the American Revolution* (September 2, 2015).

Llewellyn Toulmin, "Backcountry Warrior: Brig. Gen. Andrew Williamson: 'The Benedict Arnold of South Carolina' and America's First Major Double Agent—Part I.," *Journal of Backcountry Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2012).

⁵ C. L. Bragg, *Martyr of the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2016), 49-51.

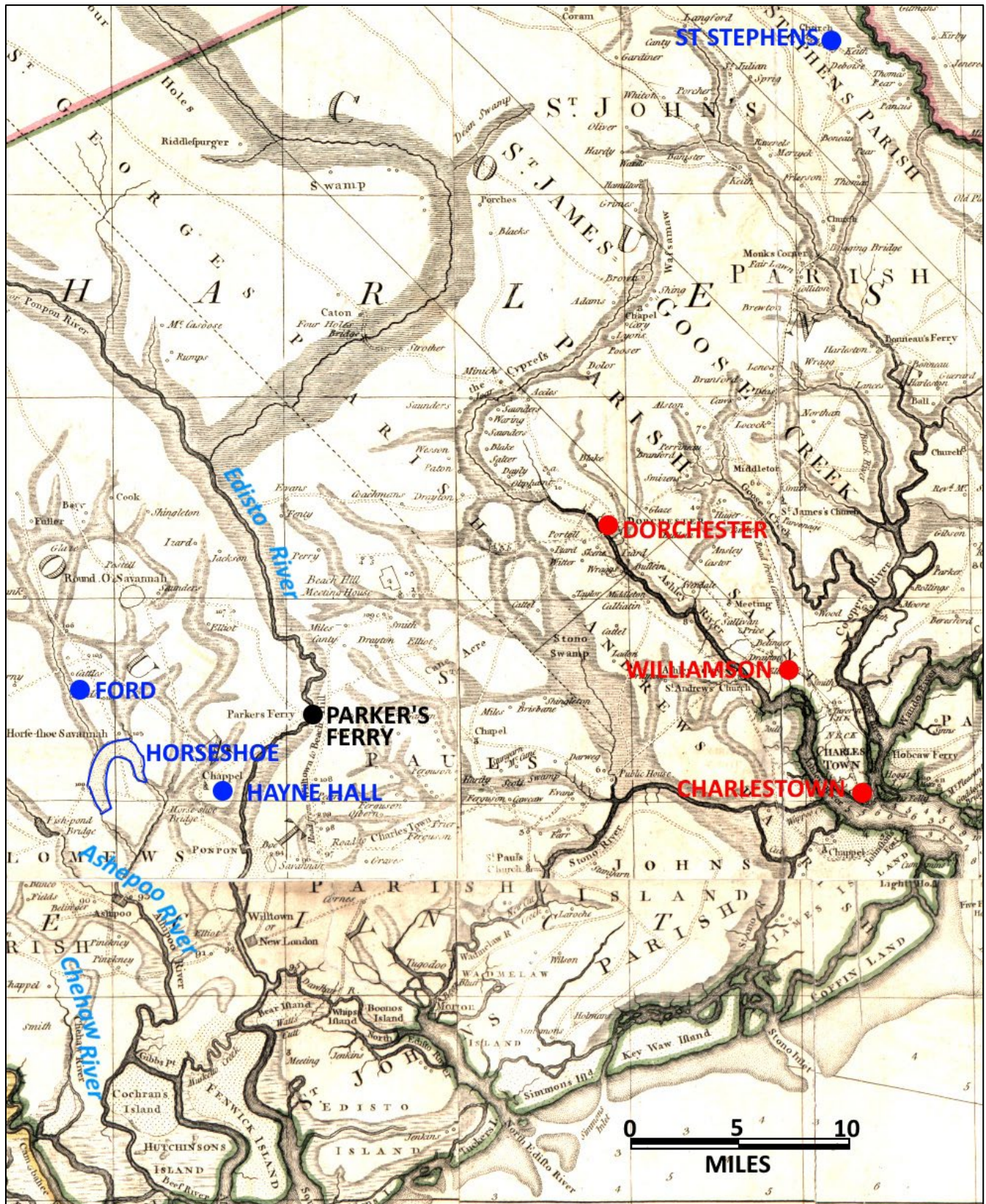


Figure 2. The location of Hayne Hall and other places mentioned early in this paper shown on the 1780 “Map of South Carolina and a Part of Georgia,” by William Faden. The lower left portion is shown in more detail in Figure 4. In this and other maps in this paper, north is toward the top.

Hayne remained quietly at home for another ten months in spite of pressure to violate his oath and take a command in the rebel militia. Chief among those who urged Hayne to return to the rebel cause was Col. William Harden, who had broken his own parole and assembled troops in an area called the Horse Shoe a few miles west of Hayne Hall. Harden had joined the partisan forces of Gen. Francis Marion, but his regiment generally operated independently. While Marion harassed British and Tories to the northeast, Harden's regiment did the same in a series of small but bloody raids in the southwestern part of the state. Harden presented Hayne with a colonel's commission signed by Marion, which Hayne initially refused. Hayne's loyalist neighbors also cajoled him to honor the oath he had signed and join their own militia. Finally Hayne realized that he had to choose sides, and he agreed to be elected colonel of a regiment of rebel militiamen.⁶ He apparently did no fighting until July 5, 1781. On that day, for reasons unknown, Hayne led a detachment that abducted Gen. Williamson at his home north of Charlestown.⁷

Maj. Thomas Fraser to the Rescue

The British were understandably alarmed by the abduction of a man under their protection so

close to their base in Charlestown. They sent Maj. Thomas Fraser to rescue his fellow Scotsman Williamson and to capture Hayne. Born in Inverness in 1755, Fraser had emigrated to New Jersey by 1777 and was commissioned a lieutenant in the British Army. His debut in South Carolina was at the Battle of Musgrove's Mill on August 19, 1780, where he was shot out of his saddle. Soon afterward he was promoted to major and given command of a cavalry unit called the South Carolina Royalists—a provincial regiment manned by Americans but trained and equipped like British regular troops.⁸ By March 6, 1781, Fraser had recovered enough to engage the militia under Gen. Thomas Sumter near Ratcliff's Bridge,⁹ and he helped defeat Gen. Nathanael Greene's southern army at the Battle of Hobkirk Hill on the following April 25.

On July 7, 1781, Fraser succeeded in liberating Williamson and capturing Hayne. The Royal Gazette of Charlestown reported it as follows:

On Thursday night last week, a small party of mounted Rebel militia surrounded the house of Andrew Williamson, Esq; formerly Brigadier-General of the South-Carolina militia, about 7 miles from town, and without allowing him time to put on his clothes, carried him off prisoner. On intelligence being received of this, Major

⁶ Bragg, *Martyr*, 53-55.

⁷ Lord Moira (Francis Rawdon) to Henry Lee, June 24, 1813, in *Revolutionary War Memoirs of General Henry Lee* 3rd Ed., ed. Robert E. Lee (reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 618. The mother of Isaac Hayne was Sarah Williamson, but it is not known whether she was related to Andrew Williamson. Williamson's home was at present Leeds Ave. and Charlene Dr. in North Charleston. "Specimen of an Intended Travelling Map of the Roads of the State of South Carolina, from Actual Survey by Walker & Abernethie: Road to Watboo Bridge, from Charleston by Goose Creek Bridge & Strawberry Ferry."

<https://www.loc.gov/item/83694075/> The plantation where Williamson was abducted is sometimes misidentified as his plantation at Horse Savannah, which was about two miles west of the plantation where he was actually abducted. The Horse Savannah plantation is shown on a 1787 plat available from the Charleston Historical Society.

⁸ Ian Saberton, "The Revolutionary War in the South: Re-evaluations of Certain British and British American

Actors," *Journal of the American Revolution* (November 21, 2016).

⁹ Harris, C. Leon and Charles B. Baxley, "'To Keep Up the Spirits of the People and Alarm the Enemy': Sumter's Rounds in South Carolina" *academia.edu*, 2024. https://www.academia.edu/118640111/_To_Keep_Up_the_Spirits_of_the_People_and_Alarm_the_Enemy_Sumter_s_Rounds_in_South_Carolina

For concise descriptions of actions mentioned in this paper, see the following:

Patrick O'Kelley, *Nothing But Blood and Slaughter* (hereafter *NBBS*), Vol. 3 (Booklocker.com, 2005).

John C. Parker, Jr., *Parker's Guide to the Revolutionary War in South Carolina*, 3rd Ed. (Columbia SC: harrelsonpress.net, 2019).

J. D. Lewis, Carolana

https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/SC_Revolutionary_War_Known_Battles_Skirmishes.htm

Fraser, with 90 of his dragoons, was detached next day in quest of them. After having effected a circuitous march of more than 70 miles through the woods, with the most profound secrecy, on Saturday morning the Major surprised their main body in their camp at the Horseshoe, killed 14 on the spot, wounded several, took Col. Isaac Hayne, their commander, prisoner, and released General Williamson from his confinement at a house in the neighbourhood.¹⁰

The anxiety to rescue General Williamson, and the Rebels not making the smallest shew of resistance, but betaking themselves to the woods in every direction, prevented their sustaining greater loss. Their numbers before that morning were estimated at more than 200—their own accounts made them much stronger.

Among the killed was the second in command, Lieutenant-Colonel McLauchlan; his brother Capt. McLauchlan was dangerously wounded.¹¹ Col. Hayne was brought to town on Sunday, and is now lodged in the Provost.¹²

After a hearing of questionable legality, Hayne was condemned to death. The sentence was considered by the Americans to be unusually harsh, and it may have been motivated by revenge for the hanging of Benedict Arnold's

British contact, Maj. John André.¹³ Hayne was hanged on August 4, 1781. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Col. Isaac Hayne led to the gallows. Painting by Carroll N. Jones, Jr., 1973.

If the British thought the hanging of Hayne would discourage the Patriots, they were correct, at least for a while. According to South Carolina's Governor in exile, John Rutledge:

the Excn' [execution] of Hayne had the Effect w^{ch} the Enemy foresaw, & expected, from that unparalleled piece of Cruelty--& indeed, a much greater Effect than you can conceive, for, a great many Protection Men, who had joined Harden, thereupon deserted him & again submitted themselves, to the British Government & Mercy¹⁴

The Harden mentioned by Rutledge was Col. William Harden. The desertion of his men was a serious matter,¹⁵ because it left Harden virtually

¹⁰ We assume the Horseshoe to be the Horseshoe Savannah shown in Fig. 2. It encloses the present community of Neyles. According to tradition, Williamson was held near the Horseshoe at the home of Ensign Tobias Ford (<http://revwarapps.org/blwt2375-155.pdf>). Beulah Glover, *Narratives of Colleton County: The Land Lying Between the Edisto and Combahee Rivers* (Walterboro SC: Beulah Glover, 1962), 25. Parker, *Parker's Guide*, 184. Ford's is shown about five miles north of Horseshoe Savannah in Figs. 2 and 4.

¹¹ Lt. Col. Thomas McLaughlin. Capt. McLaughlin's given name is unknown.

¹² The Royal Gazette, Vol. 1, No. 38. Wednesday, July 11, 1781, 3. The Provost was a dungeon in the present Old

Exchange Building at the east end of Broad Street in Charleston, shown in Figure 3.

¹³ Bragg, *Martyr*, 60-61, 67. British Col. Francis, Lord Rawdon, who approved the hanging, wrote a long justification to Henry Lee in 1813, stating that Hayne's capture of Williamson had "caused great ferment in the minds of the loyalists," who feared they might also be subject to the same treatment. Lord Moira to Lee, June 24, 1813, in Lee, *Memoirs*, 613-620.

¹⁴ Rutledge to Mr. Dawsons, Wateree, September 18, 1781 in "Letters of John Rutledge," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 18, no. 4 (October 1917), 156-157.

¹⁵ Marion to Greene, August 20, 1781, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene* (hereafter PNG), Vol. 9, ed,

powerless to prevent the British from taking the rice from plantations between Combahee and Edisto rivers. Rice was the mainstay of the economy, but the British needed it to feed thousands of soldiers and loyalist refugees in Charlestown.

Fraser lost no time in taking advantage of the situation. Only a few days after the hanging of Hayne, Fraser took a force to Combahee River to collect rice. Harden had sent 86 of his militiamen under a Major Cooper to Parson's Plantation to destroy barrels to keep Fraser from using them to remove the rice. Fraser attacked, killing 15 and capturing four. When two of Harden's officers went under a flag of truce to arrange an exchange of the captured men, Fraser had one of them put in irons and sent to the Provost — a severe breach of protocol.¹⁶ Harden could do little more than watch as the British took rice with offers the planter's couldn't refuse. On August 15 he wrote to Marion that an enemy party was still at Combahee Ferry waiting for boats to carry off rice. "What rice they cant get away they will burn."¹⁷

Marion Reinforces Harden

In response to the growing crisis, Gen. Greene asked Marion to join Harden to stop the plundering of rice:

If it is practicable I wish you to give support to Col Harden. You know the Colonels force your own and the enemies; and will do as you may think proper. Your force and Hardens appear to me competent to the business; and if you undertake it you

must move with the utmost secrecy and expedition. However you are best acquainted with the natural difficulties attending the attempt and must govern your self accordingly. But it will be of the greatest importance to check the enemy in the progress of this business; for if they are permitted to pursue it with impunity theyll soon possess themselves of all the rice of that country and totally dispirit the Militia.¹⁸

The execution of Hayne was also weighing on Greene's mind, and he proposed to retaliate against the British, but not loyalist militia:

You will see by Col Hardens letter, that the enemy have hung Col Hanes. Dont take any measures in the matter towards retaliation, for I dont intend to retalliate upon the Tory officers but the british. It is my intention to demand the reasons of the Colonels being put to death; and if they are unsatisfactory as I am sure they will be; and if they refuse to make satisfaction as I expect they will, to publish my intention of giving no quarter to british officers of any rank that fall into our hands. Should we attempt to retalliate upon their Militia officers I am sure they would persevere in the measure in order to increase the animosity between the whigs and tories that they might stand idle spectators and see them butcher each other.¹⁹

On August 20 Marion wrote to Greene that he had decided to come to the aid of Col. Harden. He planned to depart from St. Stephens on the 22nd with his mounted troops, leaving his infantry

Dennis M. Conrad (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 216-217.

¹⁶ Col. William Harden to Greene, November 7, 1781, *PNG* 9:543. Harden gave the month of Fraser's attack at Parson's Plantation as September, but it almost certainly occurred before the ambush at Parker's Ferry, and the date is usually given as August 7, 1781.

¹⁷ Harden to Marion, August 15, 1781, *PNG* 9:170, note 3.

¹⁸ Greene to Marion, August 10, 1781, *PNG* 9:159. Harden's letter has not been found.

¹⁹ Greene to Marion, August 10, 1781, *PNG* 9:159. Lord Moira implied in his 1813 letter to Lee that he did not think Greene was serious in his threat to retaliate against British officers, and in fact, there is no evidence that he did. Marion and other officers may have taken Greene's threat more seriously, however, especially in the days immediately following Greene's proclamation. Lord Moira to Lee, June 24, 1813 in Lee, *Memoirs*, 619.

behind so the British would think he was still in camp. Marion asked Greene to order Col. Hezekiah Maham or Col. Peter Horry to provide him with a detachment of cavalry.²⁰ By forced marches Marion's horsemen covered the more than 50 miles from St. Stephens to Round O in a single day.²¹ (Fig.2) On arriving he found Col. Harden "very sick, & his troops not Collected," so he spent the following day resting the men and horses. Marion's movements from the 25th through the 27th are described below and in Figure 4.

[On the 25th I] marched to the Horse Shoe; the twenty sixth at night I was joined by Col^o Stafford²² with one hund^d fifty men & Major Harden with Eighty, which made me four hundred men. The 27th I crossed the great Swamp the head of Ashapo [Ashepoo River], & Encamped within five miles of the Enemy at Middleton's plant^{on} on the South of Godfrey Savana²³ The day before I Detached Col Hugh Horry²⁴ to Chehaw

where I was informed was three schooners taking in rice with a Guard of thirty men but unluckily they heard of my Approach & went down the river the day before.²⁵

As he expected, Greene obtained no satisfactory explanation from the British for the hanging of Col. Isaac Hayne. Consequently on August 26 Greene issued a proclamation targeting "British Regular Officers" for retaliation.²⁶ Marion probably got word of Greene's proclamation within a day or two, either by express from Greene or from spies in Charlestown. Hayne's friends and neighbors would certainly have been glad to inform Marion that he was only five miles from the British officer who had captured Hayne. There is no documentary evidence that Marion was intent on avenging the hanging of Hayne, but it appears reasonable to us that Greene's proclamation and the urging of Hayne's friends motivated Marion as much as the plundering of rice.

²⁰ Marion to Greene, August 20, 1781, PNG 9:216-217. Maham and Horry commanded state cavalry regiments, and although frequently attached to the militia of Marion, they did not consider themselves under his command. According to William Dobein James, *A Sketch of the Life of Brig. Gen. Francis Marion* (Charleston SC: Gould & Riley, 1821), 126, Marion also sent Capt. George Cooper on a diversionary raid. "In the mean time, Capt. Cooper passed on to the Cypress, and there routed a party of Tories, and then proceeding down the road, he drove off the cattle from before the enemy's fort at Dorchester. He next moved on down the Charleston road; a body of Tories lay in a brick church, which stood then twelve miles from town; he charged and drove them before him. Next, passing into Goose creek road, he proceeded to the ten mile house, returned and passed over Goose creek bridge, took a circuitous route around the British at Monk's corner and arrived in camp at Peyre's plantation near the canal, where Gen. Marion now lay, with many prisoners, and without

the loss of a man." We could find no other account of such a raid, and Marion did not camp at Peyre's Plantation until November 14, 1781. Marion to Greene, November 14, 1781, PNG 9:573.

²¹ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, PNG 9:288-290.

²² William Stafford, Lower Granville County Militia. https://www.carolana.com/SC/Counties/granville_county_original.html

²³ The Great Swamp is south of present Walterboro. Middleton's plantation appears to have been near present Jonesville. It probably belonged to Arthur Middleton (1742-1787), a signer of the Declaration of Independence, whose main residence was Middleton Place on Ashley River.

²⁴ Col. Hugh Horry belonged to Col. Peter Horry's State Regiment of Light Dragoons.

²⁵ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, PNG 9:289.

²⁶ Greene's Proclamation, August 26, 1781, PNG 9:252.

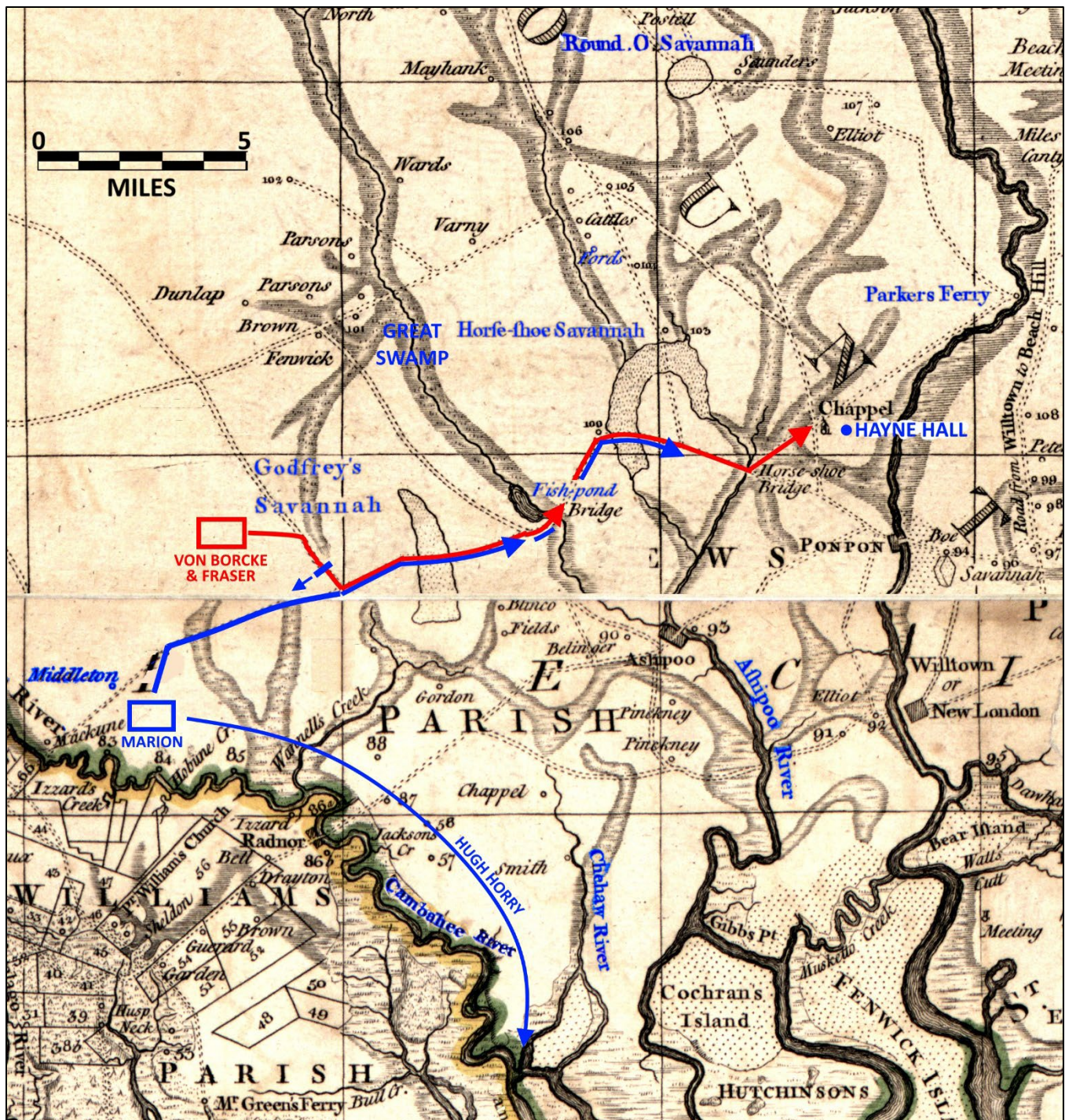


Figure 4. Part of the Faden map with names of important sites prior to the Battle at Parker's Ferry recolored blue. Possibly using back roads not shown on the map, Marion went from Round O to the Horseshoe, across the Great Swamp at the headwaters of Ashepoo River, then south of Godfrey's Savannah. He dispatched Hugh Horry to Chehaw River after a British foraging party, but it had already departed down Combahee River, and the troops under von Borcke and Fraser that may have guarded it went north of Marion's position. On August 27 Marion arrived at Middleton's Plantation, while his troops camped within five miles of the British. That evening the British pushed his pickets aside. On the 28th Marion pursued them to the Fish Pond in a failed attempt to do battle. The British continued on to Hayne Hall, and Marion camped three miles away.

Marion's First Chance to Retaliate

On the same day that Greene issued his proclamation, Marion sent scouts to search for the enemy, who had returned from foraging along Combahee River and were camped near Godfrey's Savannah five miles north of Marion.²⁷

I sent out partys to reconiter the Enemy who found them in post too strong to make any Attempt on them. Their force by All the Intelligence I could get consist of One hundred & Eighty Hessians & one hundred fifty British; one hundred & thirty Toreys and Eighty horse under Maj^r Frazier all of the Queens Rangers.²⁸

The 180 Hessians were the Fusilier Regiment von Ditfurth from Hesse-Kassel, commanded by Lt. Col. Ernst Leopold von Borcke (or Borck).²⁹ Von Borcke appears to have been the highest in rank and therefore in command. (A complete order of battle is in Appendix A.) The 150 British regulars are mentioned only by Marion, as far as we can tell. They are often said to have been the 30th Regiment of Foot, but we have found no documentation. The 80 horse under "Frazier" were not primarily Queen's Rangers, as Marion (and others) thought, but Fraser's provincial cavalry—the South Carolina Royalists.³⁰ (A small body of Queen's Rangers under Capt. John Saunders was with Fraser, but most of the Queen's Rangers were in Virginia.) The 130 "Toreys" included various loyalist militia groups. There was also a detachment of artillery.

Although Marion had only 400 men to oppose what he thought was a force totaling 540, he was itching for a fight. He posted a guard at the causeway to delay the British till Marion could

join them, but they were not able to hold their position. The British marched on to camp near the Fish Pond at the plantation of Maj. Edmond Massingbird Hyrne, Gen. Greene's deputy commissary general in charge of American prisoners.³¹ In Marion's words

I was Determin to take all Advantages of situation, the Causeway at Godfrey Savanna was a good one, & I placed a guard there (my whole body Lay about two miles from it) with orders to Defend that pass until I could come up). That night 27 about twelve OClock my patroles met the Enemy two miles from this pass coming down, & before I could get my Troops in motion the Guard Quitted their post without fire a Gun & the Enemy past it, & proceed to M^r Heyrne's Plantⁿ near the fish ponds.³²

On the following day Marion pursued the British but found his forces too weak to do more than exchange a few shots.

The 28th in the morning I marched after them & found the post too Advantageous to Attempt them there. I drew up in a wood in sight of them & some few Shotts past between my r[e]coineters & their picquets, they had two men wounded. A party of their horse came out, but a few Shots sent them back with the loss of one horse. I remaine several hours finding that nothing was to be done I retired to my Camp.³³

²⁷ "We proceeded as far as the Combabia [Combahee] River. This was a foraging party to procure rice, etc., for the hospitals." Stephen Jarvis, "An American's Experience in the British Army," Part 2. The Connecticut Magazine. 11, no. 3 (autumn 1907), 478.

²⁸ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:289.

²⁹ Royal Georgia Gazette, September 13, 1781, page 3 and in Appendix B.

³⁰ Fraser himself called his cavalry the South Carolina Royalists. Fraser to Brig. Gen. McArthur, May 16, 1783. <http://www.royalprovincial.com/military/rhist/scroyal/scrl et3.htm>

³¹ Hyrne had been negotiating the exchange of prisoners at the time of Hayne's imprisonment, but apparently Hayne was kept out of the arrangement. Bragg, *Martyr*, 60.

³² Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:289.

³³ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:289.

Marion Plans the Ambuscade

According to Marion, immediately after the encounter at Fish Pond, the British “marched to Ashepo; the 29th they pass the river & marched to Col^o Hayne's Plantⁿ. I at the sa[me] time passed the fish ponds five miles above Ashepo & encampT within three [miles] of them.” Lt. Stephen Jarvis, an American in Fraser’s regiment in the company of Capt. Archibald Campbell, also stated that the British camped at Hayne Hall: “We halted at Colonel Haines’ Plantation the night after he was brought home and buried in his garden. I saw his grave.” (Fig. 5)³⁴



Figure 5. The Isaac Hayne cemetery. (C. Leon Harris)

Hayne Hall was later described as follows by a Continental soldier:

This evening I went on command to Col. Haines’s farm, whose lot it was to fall unfortunately into our cruel enemy’s hands, and was hung by those damnable murderers.... A very elegant mansion house and an overseer’s house surrounded by negro houses, a very fine brick rice mill, store houses, &c. A fine pond of water all around the house, which affords a great quantity of fish and wild ducks. From the

³⁴ Jarvis, “American’s Experience,” 478. Jarvis’s statement that Hayne was buried the day before they arrived at Hayne Hall seems unlikely, considering that 25 days would have elapsed since his death in the heat of August.

³⁵ William Feltman, “The Journal of Lieut. William Feltman, of the First Pennsylvania Regiment, from May 26, 1781 to April 25, 1782, embracing the Siege of

main road to said house is a very beautiful avenue of about a mile long.... A garden full of very fine flowers, &c.³⁵

It was apparent that von Borcke and Fraser intended to march from Hayne Hall to Parker’s Ferry to cross Edisto River on the way to Charlestown. (Fig. 6) Parker’s Ferry was a major link between Charlestown and points west, and the road to it may have been the only one nearby that could handle artillery. Unfortunately for von Borcke and Fraser, the road passed through a swamp in which Marion could lie in ambush.



Figure 6. The Edisto River (also known as Pon Pon River) looking south toward Parker’s Ferry. (C. Leon Harris)

On August 30 Marion

went below them & formed an Ambuscade in a thick wood Within a mile of Parkers Ferry within forty yards of the road which the Enemy must come, here I was Informed of upwards of one hundred toreyes under a Col. Cuningham from Dorchester & Stono Laying on the banks of the river at ParkersFerry waiting for L^t Col^o De Benin [sic] who Commaned the Enemys force.”³⁶

A 1793 survey shows that the road to Parker’s Ferry is essentially unchanged. (Fig. 7)

Yorktown and the Southern Campaign,” Historical Society of Pennsylvania (1853), entry for February 19, 1782, 39-40.

³⁶ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, PNG 9:289. As noted above, Lt. Col. Ernst Leopold von Borcke was in command, but Marion apparently thought Col. Friedrich von Benning commanded.

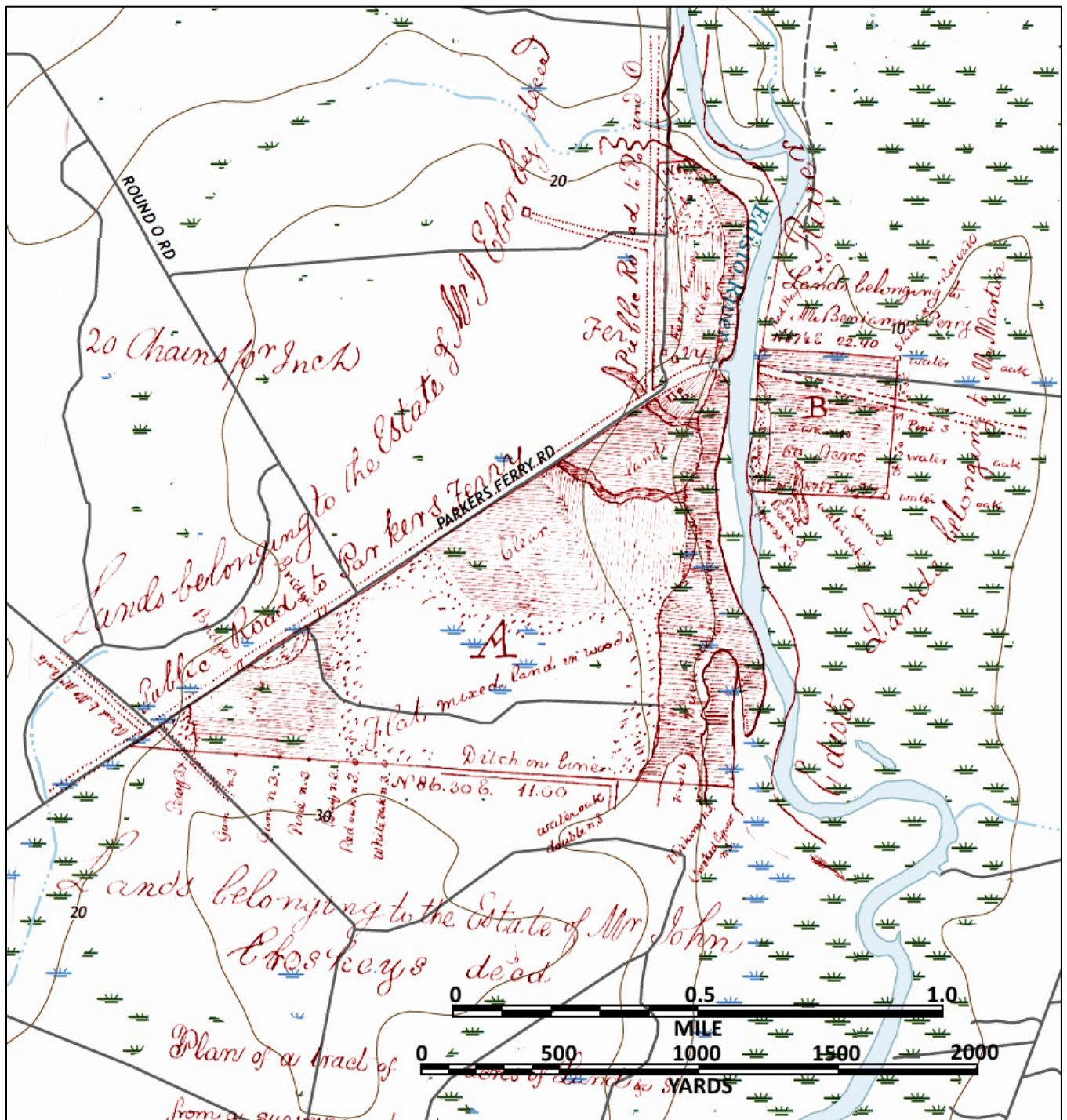


Figure 7. Overlay onto a current USGS topo map of a 1793 survey³⁷ recolored red for clarity and scaled using the upper boundary line for parcel B (22.40 chains = 492.8 yards long). The “Public Road to Parkers Ferry” corresponds to present Parkers Ferry Rd. The northwesterly road on the left labeled “Road to Mr. McCants,” is also shown in the map in Figure 8. This and the road across Parkers Ferry Road from it correspond to unnamed roads on the current map. The northward “Public Road to Round O” is now a continuation of Parkers Ferry Road. Present Round O Road apparently did not exist in 1793.

³⁷ Copy of “Plan of a tract of [blank] acres of Land &c from a survey made in April 1793 by Wm Sturges certified Dec’r 1799 by Joseph Purcell. Book Y no. 6, p. 324 also Book W7 p. 358.”

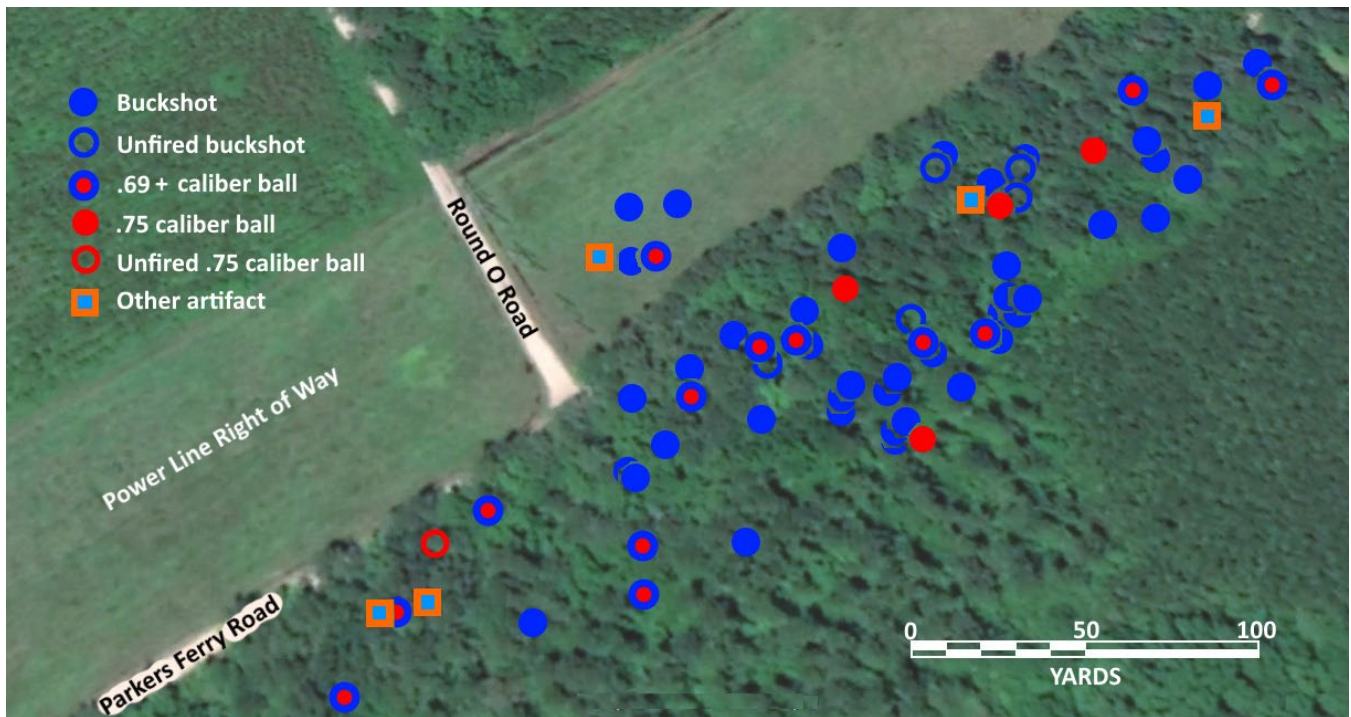


Figure 9. Artifacts found along Parkers Ferry Road about a mile from the ferry plotted on a satellite image.⁴⁰ In spite of dense vegetation and electromagnetic interference under the power lines, many artifacts, especially buckshot were found. Buckshot was often used by Marion’s infantry, who were therefore probably on the other side of the road from where most of the buckshot were found. Balls of .75 caliber were used by the British. Balls of .69 caliber and up to .75 cannot be reliably attributed to either side.



Figure 10. The ambush site inferred from archaeological evidence, looking toward Parker’s Ferry at Round O Road. Most of Marion’s men were about 40 yards from the road at the clearing under the power lines. (C. Leon Harris)

On Marion’s right, to the southwest, and 100 yards from the road was Maj. Charles Harden’s militia. Maj. Samuel Cooper’s dragoons could

not have operated in the swamps, so they would have been on a road farther to Marion’s right, presumably the unnamed road shown in Figure 7. Cooper and Harden were to attack the enemy’s rear. Marion did not mention the position of Horry’s dragoons.

My right Division of about Eighty men was Commanded by Maj^r [Harden] who I ordered to retire one hundred yards from the Line, & to march up when the firing began on the left; my Swordsmen of Sixty horse I sent under Maj^r Cooper to fall in the rear of the Enemy to Draw their Attention that way & to follow them whenever they moved, & to keep in sight, with positive orders to Charge their Enemys rear at all hazards, as soon the firing became Generall.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Based on Stephen D. Smith and James B. Legg “Running the Gauntlet: Locating the Battle of Parkers Ferry, South

Carolina August 30, 1781” (Columbia: South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. 2019), 32.

⁴¹ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, PNG 9:289.

Marion's men waited silently in the steamy swamp for an unknown time, stifling the urge to curse and slap at the swarms of mosquitoes. As the sun set to their right, they were barely able to see their comrades among the dwarf palmettos, switch cane, red bay, sweet gum, and loblolly pines. They had been given passwords by which to distinguish themselves from loyalist militiamen, who were dressed much the same as them except for small tokens in their hats. Still, in the fading light, mistakes could happen.

At about sunset⁴² some militiamen said to be under a Col. Cunningham came down the road from Parker's Ferry to meet von Borcke and Fraser. One of the loyalist militiamen spotted one of Marion's troops and shouted the challenge. Not hearing the countersign they fired, and Marion's troops fired in return until some of Marion's cavalry drove Cunningham's men back. (Fig. 11)

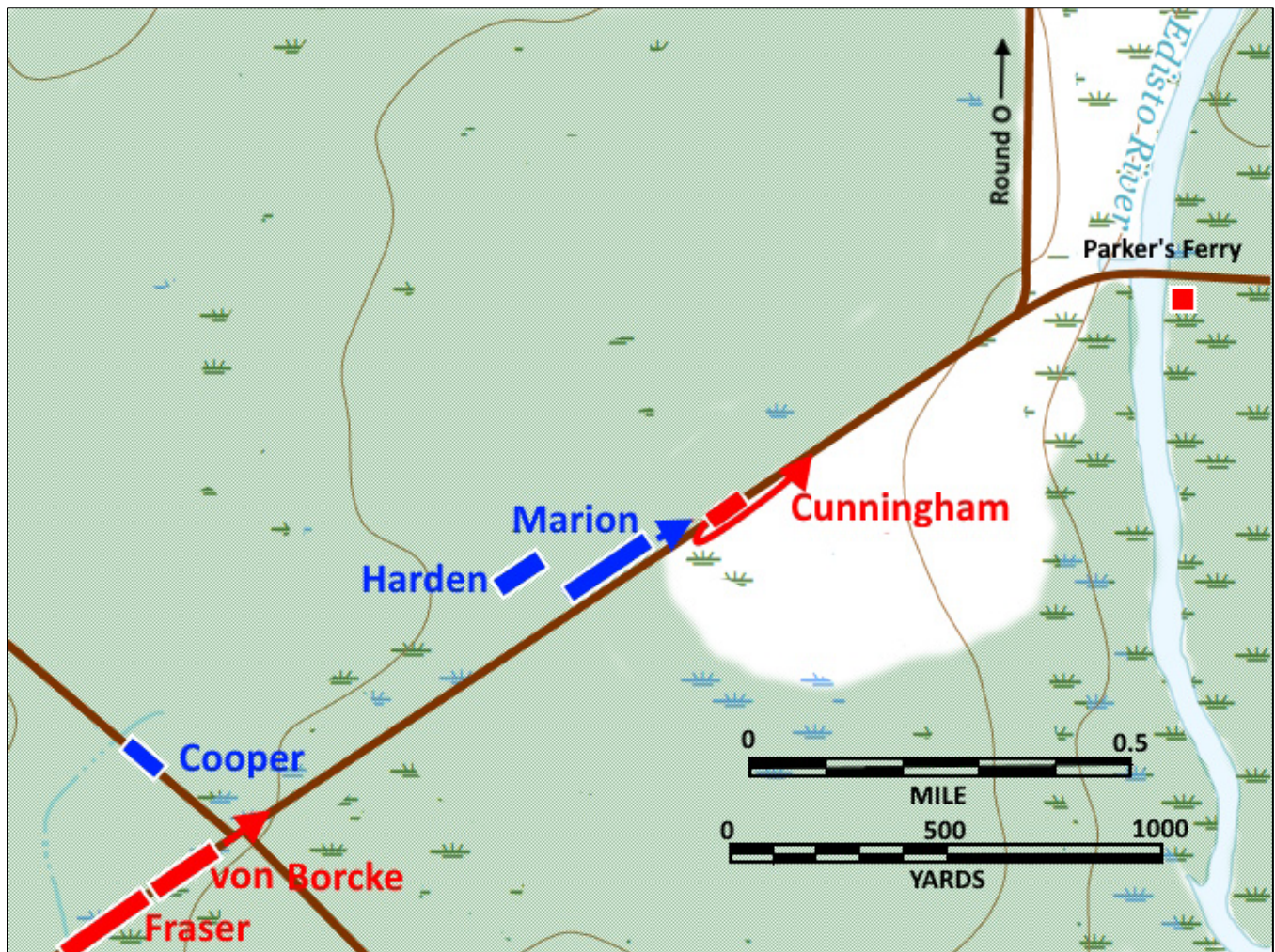


Figure 11. Phase 1 of Marion's ambush. A party of Cunningham's Loyalist militia discover Marion's men, a firefight ensues, and the Loyalists are chased back across Parker's Ferry by some of Marion's dragoons. We assume the area was covered in vegetation (green shading) except for the roads and clearings shown in the 1793 survey (Fig. 8).

⁴² On August 30, sun sets at 7:46 EDT, or about 7:05 according to a sundial. Civil twilight ends about 25 minutes after sunset.

Marion described this initial action as follows:

Here [Marion] waited until sunsett when part of the toreyes from the ferry came on which I Intended should pass, but they discovered one of my men & Challenged, not Answering they fired, & I could not restrain the men longer they returned it which made them immediately return back on the spur. I sent a few horse after them which rind them a Cross the river.⁴³

It may have been during this encounter that Ralph Cassel in Lt. Col. William Stafford's mounted militia was wounded, as he described in his pension application:

received a wound in his head in said engagement & arms, and was cut severely with the sword, "that the Enemy crossed the river and compelled us to retreat, that during the retreat his horse was shot from under him & he [was] persued by one of the enemy & was relieved by Sergeant Mcdonald & a man by the name of Pierce, who shot the person that was cutting him with his sword & then commanded him to mount the horse of the person that had been inflicting the wounds aforesaid upon him, which he did & made his escape⁴⁴

"Runing The Gauntlet"

Von Borcke's infantrymen and the artillery, followed by Fraser's cavalry, were "a mile or so" from Parker's Ferry when they heard the shooting. Fraser hurried his horsemen ahead and sprang Marion's trap. (Fig. 12) In Jarvis's words:

We marched in this order until we came to a long swamp, a mile or so from Parker's Ferry, when we heard some few shots in front, and Major Fraser ordered the Cavalry to advance, and seeing some Troops at a long distance off, and supposing them to be the enemy, charged over this long causeway and fell into an ambuscade, laid by the enemy....⁴⁵

According to Marion:

The Enemy hearing the fire & being on their way down Immediatly sent their Cavalry to resque them & came on full speed, & received the fire of the whole Line Runing The Gauntlet through them.⁴⁶

William Smith stated, "We were stationed in the woods by the Roadside about a mile from Parker's Ferry and fired Three brisk rounds upon the enemy as they passed in haste down to the Ferry. The battle was fought at about 4 O'clock P.M. and in very hot weather."⁴⁷ Jarvis described it as "the most galling fire ever Troops experienced."

According to Solomon Freer, one of Marion's horsemen,

as soon as the enemy approached, the left were ordered to fire first, and then the right, after which the left should fall back and form a line below the right and continue the fire – the horse (my company) were ordered to charge back and forward as occasioned required. Thus was the battle plan[n]ed, and it was punctually obeyed.⁴⁸

⁴³ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:289-290. It is not clear which of Marion's dragoons were involved or where they had been hiding.

⁴⁴ Pension application of Ralph Cassel R1791 <http://revwarapps.org/r1791.pdf>. Pension applications

cited in this paper are transcribed by Will Graves at revwarapps.org.

⁴⁵ Jarvis, "American's Experience," 478.

⁴⁶ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:290.

⁴⁷ <http://revwarapps.org/r9875.pdf>.

⁴⁸ <http://revwarapps.org/w8826.pdf>.

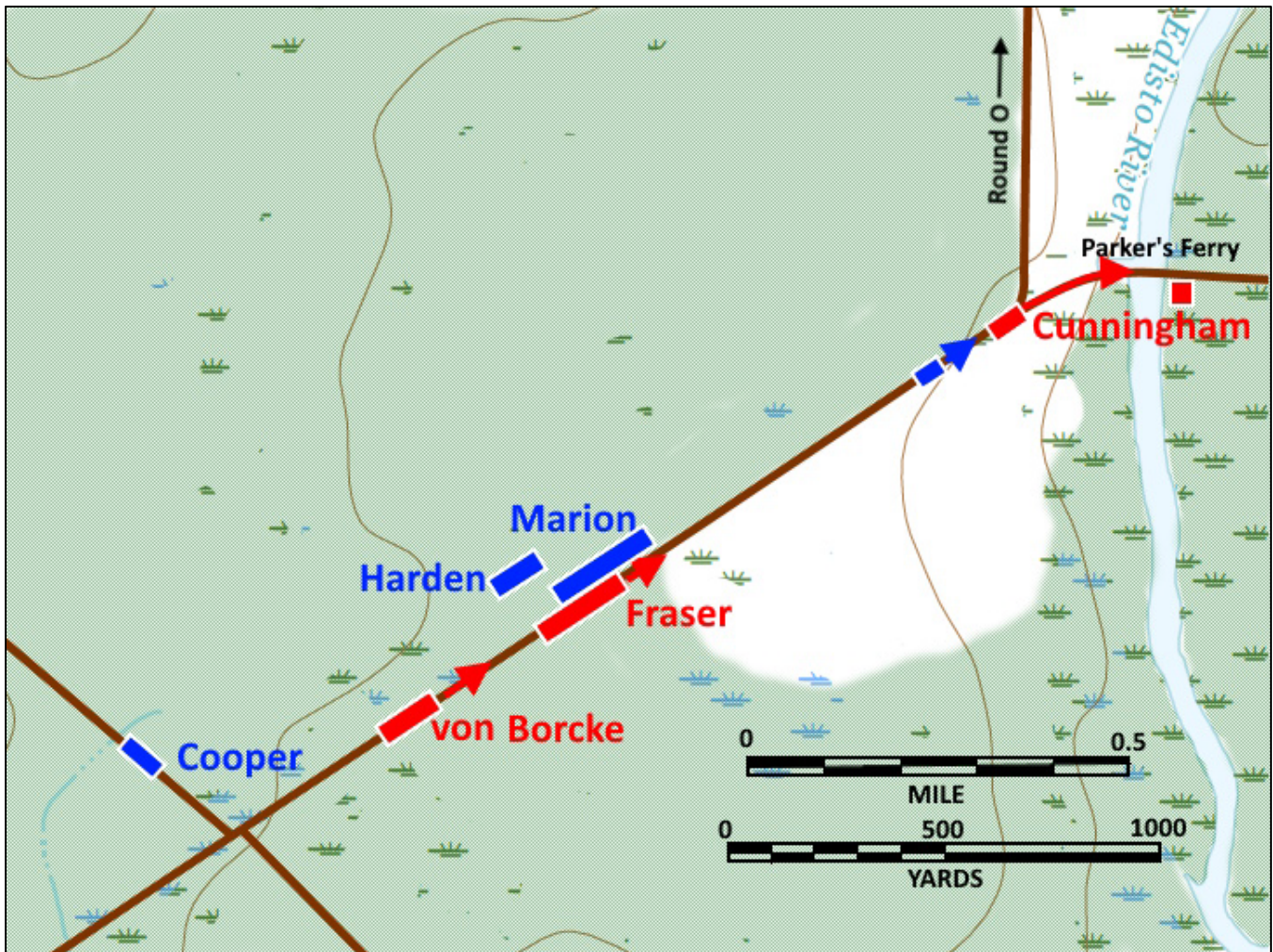


Figure 12. Phase 2 of Marion's ambush. Fraser's dragoons ride to attack Marion's horsemen and are themselves ambushed.

If Freer's statement is correct, Fraser's horsemen in front would have been the first hit. Marion's troops on his left would then move to the right, sending a wave of destruction down the British file. Fraser's cavalry swords were useless against Marion's guns, and in the thick vegetation, dim light, and lingering gun smoke there was no clear target for their carbines and pistols. "We only saw the flash of the pieces the enemy was so complete hid from our view, and we had only to push forward men and horses falling before and

behind."⁴⁹ Fraser's cavalry could only race through the hail of balls and buckshot, and the race slowed as wounded and dying men and horses fell on the road. Fraser had his horse shot under him, and the panicked horses that followed rode over him. Von Borcke's disciplined Hessians and the artillery rushed to the scene, and "a heavy fire Insued which Continued for Some time."⁵⁰ According to Jarvis, "All our Artillery were killed or wounded before they could bring their guns to bear upon the enemy."⁵¹ (Fig. 13)

⁴⁹ Jarvis, "American's Experience," 478.

⁵⁰ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:290.

⁵¹ Jarvis, "American's Experience," 478.

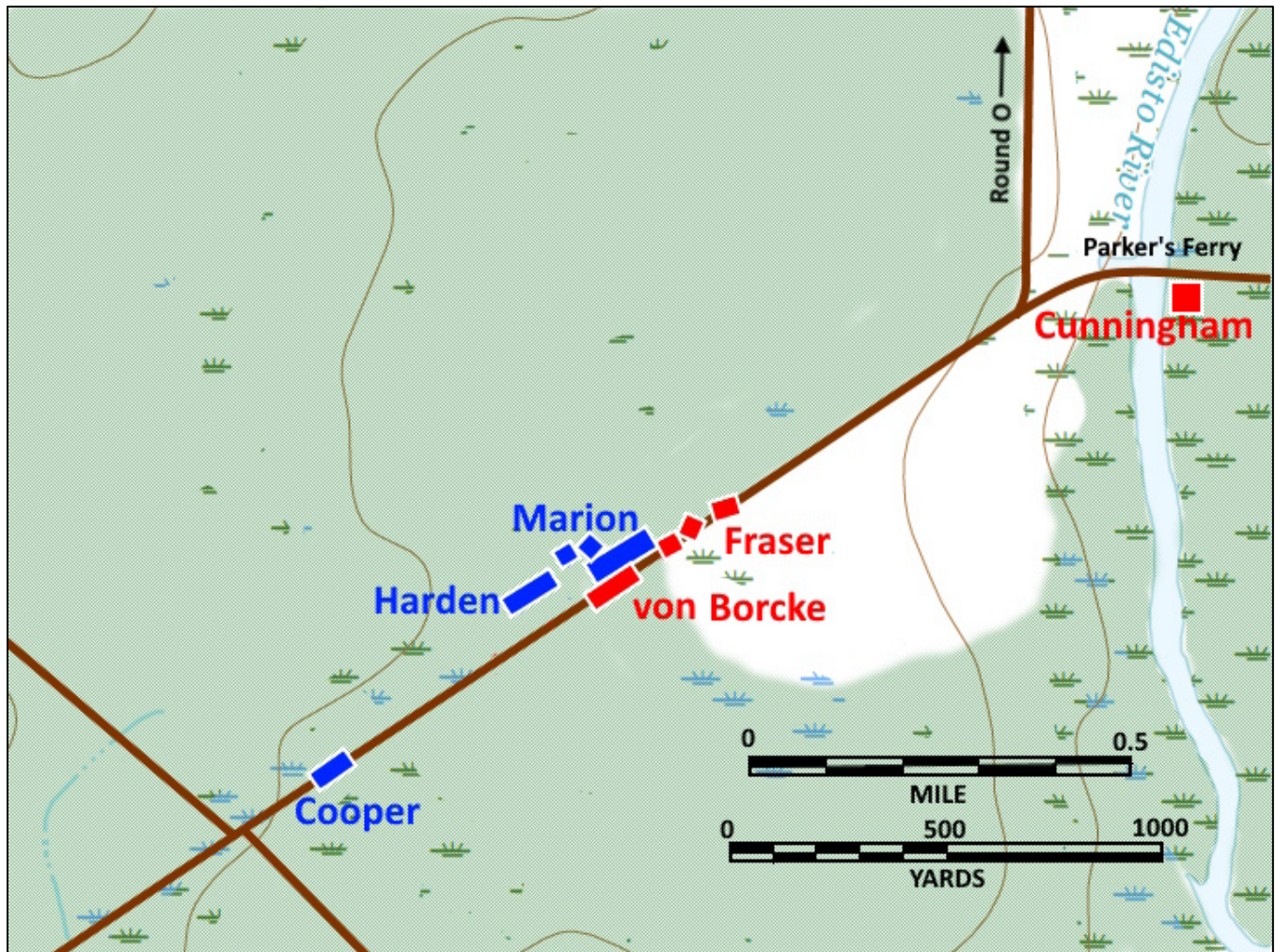


Figure 13. Phase 3 of Marion's ambush. Fraser's cavalry has suffered heavily, and von Borcke's infantry exchange fire with Marion's troops.

Von Borcke's troops suffered heavily and might have suffered more if Marion's plan had been carried out. Maj. Harden's men were to rush out of the swamp and attack von Borcke broadside, while Cooper's dragoons were to come up the road and attack the rear. Neither unit performed as ordered, according to Marion.

I have the pleasure of inform you that Col^o Stafford who sustained the heaviest fire & Co^{lo} Ervin & Horry behaved Like the Sons Liberty, & Had Maj^r Harden with his Div

& Maj^r Cooper with the Cavalry Obey'd Orders, It is probable the Greatest part if not the whole must have been Destroy'd or taken, but the first never fired a Gun & the Second was not in sight by which means I Lost above one third of my force & in the two most material points.⁵²

To make matters worse, some "Villains" among Marion's men, perhaps mistaking Harden's men for the enemy, "Cry'd out they ware flankings on the right & penetrating the wood they immediatly

⁵² Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:290. Also the following:

"Orders near Jenkins Ferry 31st Augt 1781— Genl Marion returns his thanks to Colo Stafford Ervin And Horry & the Officers & men of their Division for their Spirited and good Behaviour in the Action of yesterday had they been Assisted by the Officer of the cavalry And the

right Division agreeable to Orders, he is Certain that very few of the Enemy would have Escaped" Orderly book of Marion's Brigade of South Carolina militia, 1781, Feb. 16 - 1782, Dec. 15. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Garden Digital Library <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/17944>

broke.”⁵³ Marion managed to collect his troops in two lines of infantry with cavalry in the rear for further battle, but the Hessians and British retreated in haste, taking their artillery and wounded. (Fig. 14)

We were rallying them & forming the second Line in front of the horses, which was piquetted two hundred yards from the first line the Enemy took that Opportunity,

carry off their field p^s & wounded & retreated on a trot.”⁵⁴

Although the nearly full moon was rising⁵⁵ it must have been too dark to continue fighting in any case. Marion “Immediately marched up to the road, & took possession of the Ground & remained three hours, but my people having been without provisions for 24 hours I retired two miles to refresh them.”⁵⁶

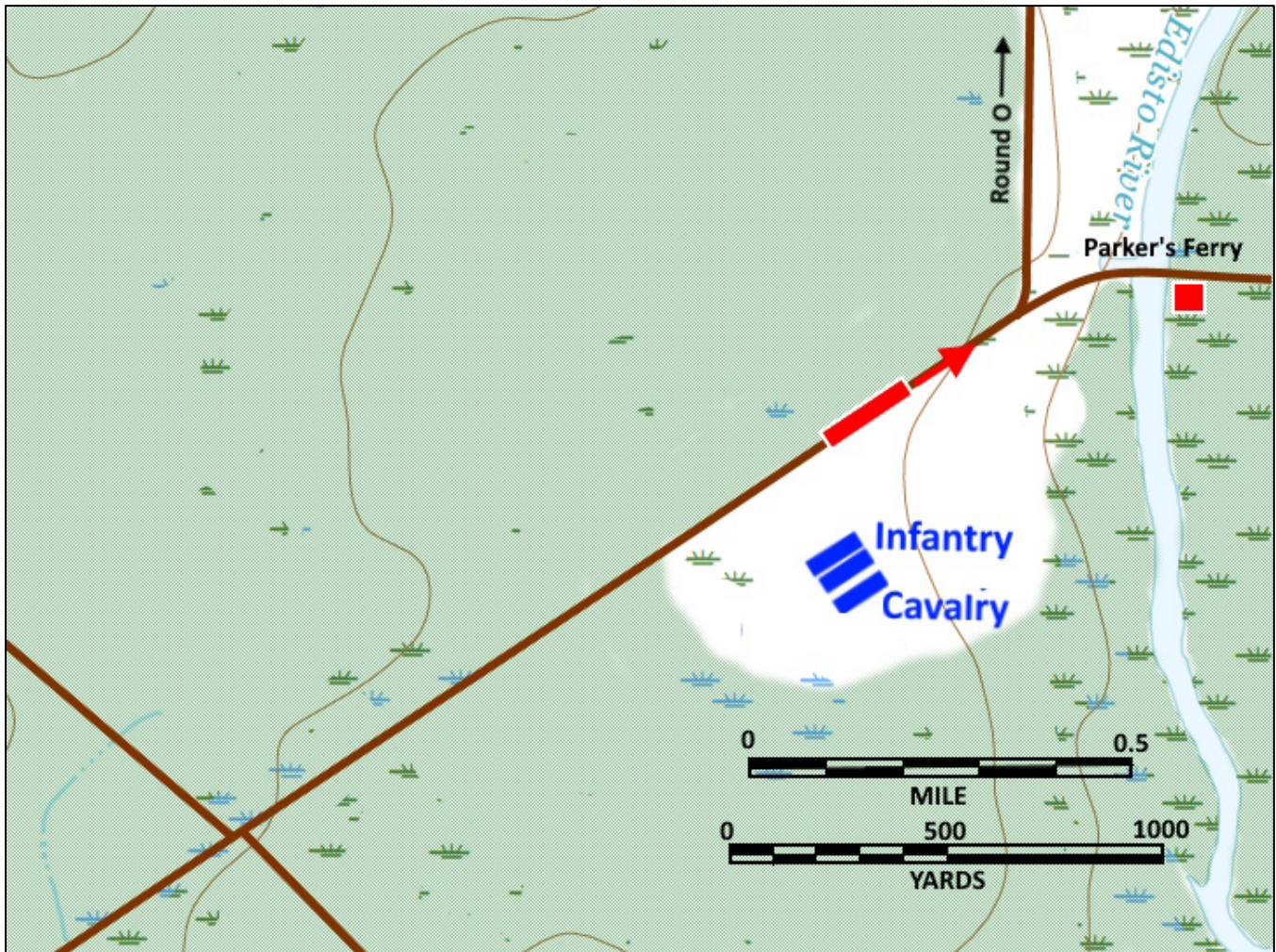


Figure 14. Phase 4 of Marion's ambushade. Marion forms for battle, but the British retreat.

⁵³ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, PNG 9:290.

⁵⁴ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, PNG 9:290.

⁵⁵ <https://www.moonpage.com/>

⁵⁶ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, PNG 9:290.

Aftermath

Marion found “twenty men & twenty three horses Dead on the spott.” The victor was honor-bound to bury the enemy dead, and early on the next morning Marion sent a party to do that duty, “but the Enemy coming up with their field p^s & a superior force they withdrew.”⁵⁷ Later that day Marion estimated losses as follows:

A Return of the Killed & wounded in the action At Parkers ferry the 30th Aug^t 1781–

Col^o Staffords reg^t three privates wounded & one killed

The Loss of the Enemy 18 men killed & one negro taken

23 horses d^o and five wounded and Seven taken –

Maj^r Frazer wounded & Cap^t Campbel, by the best Accounts they had Eighty men wounded.⁵⁸

After the British had left the area, Marion sent a party across Parker’s Ferry, and they found 40 dead horses, all but three of them bearing the brand of the Continental Light Dragoons. These were probably some of the horses Tarleton had captured in the spring of 1780 at Biggin Bridge and Lenud’s Ferry.⁵⁹

The Enemy lost no time, passing the river & A party Sent after them found a number of horses dead & wounded on the road, Amounting to forty in the whole. Three only was not Dragoon horses which was known by the Brand CLD. All of them Capital horses⁶⁰

Marion estimated that 80 of the enemy were wounded, including Fraser, who was “greatly

Bruised” by having his own horses ridden over him.

A man who they took from the ferry & Carry’d some miles Give an Account of fifty men being badly wounded & many others which I think cannot be Less than Eighty in the whole. Captⁿ Campbell was wounded in the Arm & thigh Maj^r Frazier had his horse killed and his whole Cavalray rode over him & is greatly Bruised.

As usual, estimates of losses vary. A loyalist newspaper, The Royal Georgia Gazette did not report British losses, but opined that, “the enemy’s loss, from the best intelligence, was very considerable.” (Appendix B) Jarvis, another unreliable source, gave the following assessment: “We [British] lost one hundred twenty-five killed and a great many wounded, and the enemy retired without the loss of a man.” William H. Mathers stated that, “we ambuscaded them at Parkers ferry, sixteen strides from the road, killed and wounded about one hundred.”⁶¹ William Terrell stated that about 25 British and Tories were killed.⁶²

According to Gov. Rutledge, when Marion joined him,

Harden had not 50 Men, in Arms, & had it not been, for Marions Appearance in that Quarter, & his Support & Countenance, at such a critical Period, Hardens Force w^d. have been reduced much lower–Happily, his putting Fraser to flight, has given the Southward-Militia fresh Spirits.⁶³

In addition, Fraser’s injuries and the loss of his men and horses kept him out of the last major battle in South Carolina, at Eutaw Springs on

⁵⁷ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:290

⁵⁸ “Orders near Jenkins Ferry 31st Augt 1781. Orderly book of Marion's Brigade of South Carolina militia, 1781, Feb. 16 - 1782, Dec. 15. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Garden Digital Library <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/17945>

⁵⁹ C. Leon Harris and Charles B. Baxley, “Tarleton Tightens the Noose Around Charlestown Neck: Biggin Bridge, April 14, 1780,” *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* 18, no. 2 (November 29, 2021).

⁶⁰ Marion to Greene, September 3, 1781, *PNG* 9:290.

⁶¹ <http://revwarapps.org/s45846.pdf>.

⁶² <http://revwarapps.org/s16550.pdf>.

⁶³ Rutledge to Mr. Dawsons, Wateree, September 18, 1781.

September 8, 1781. Six months later, however, he was again out on foraging expeditions and determined to continue the cycle of retaliation, this time in Marion's territory. On one such expedition on February 25, 1781, he encountered Marion at Tidyman's Plantation.⁶⁴ Marion was routed and reported to have been killed, and Fraser was greatly disappointed when the report proved false. Another six months later, and one day before the anniversary of Fraser's debacle at Parker's Ferry, Fraser was on another foraging expedition when he saw another chance to retaliate against Marion. Taking his troops 20 miles out of their way, he attacked Marion at

Wadboo Plantation, but Marion remained protected among the buildings and fences.⁶⁵ The war was essentially over by then, and Marion saw no need for further bloodshed.

After the war, Fraser remained in South Carolina and operated lumber mills on Edisto River. Whether he ever got over the bruising of his body and ego at Parker's Ferry is unknown. No British officer was ever hanged in retaliation for the execution of Isaac Hayne. Whether Gen. Francis Marion intended it or not, his ambush near Parker's Ferry came as close as anything to exacting retribution.

⁶⁴ Charles B. Baxley, David Neilan, and C. Leon Harris. "Outfoxed – Marion's Forces Dispersed by a Genius: Wambaw Bridge and Tidyman's Plantation February 24-25, 1782.," *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* 11, no. 4 (September 2016).

⁶⁵ C. Leon Harris and Charles B. Baxley, "Francis Marion's Last Engagement: The Avenue of the Cedars: Wadboo Plantation, August 29, 1782," *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* 16, no. 3.2 (April 27, 2019).

APPENDIX A: Order of Battle⁶⁶

AMERICANS (400)

Marion's Partisan Brigade

**Brigadier General Francis Marion,
Commanding Officer**

Capt. William Nettles

Georgetown Militia

Col. John Ervin

3rd Regiment South Carolina Light Dragoons detachment

Maj. Samuel Cooper

Peter Horry's Light Dragoons

Lt. Col. Hugh Horry

Lower Granville Militia (150)

Lt. Col. William Stafford

Capt. Charles Dupont⁶⁷

Upper Granville Militia (80)

Maj. Charles Harden

Maj. Ladson Cooper⁶⁸

Colleton County Militia (mounted)

Capt. Peter Youngblood⁶⁹

APPENDIX B: The Ambush at Parker's Ferry as Reported by the Royal Georgia Gazette, September 13, 1781, page 3.⁷¹

The detachment sent from this town some time ago, under the command of Lieut. Col. de Borck, having effected their business of collecting rice, upon their return near Parker's Ferry the 31st ult. the infantry fell in with a party of Rebels under Gen. Marion, who were strongly posted in a swamp with an abatis in their front;⁷² a small party of them having appeared drawn up

BRITISH (540)

Hesse-Kassel Fusilier Regiment von Ditfurth (180)

Lt. Col. Ernst Leopold von Borcke

South Carolina Royalists (80)

Maj. Thomas Fraser

Capt. Archibald Campbell⁷⁰

Queen's Rangers

Capt. John Saunders

South Carolina Loyalist Militia

Col. Cunningham

North Carolina Independent Dragoons

Capt. Robert Gillies

Royal Artillery detachment

unknown commander

30th Regiment of Foot? (150)

unknown commander

in the road, Col. de Borck immediately ordered Major Fraser with the South Carolina cavalry to charge them, by which means he received the enemy's fire, who were in ambuscade in the swamp; the infantry then returned the fire, and compelled the Rebels to retire in great confusion; it being late in the evening prevented Col. de Borck's pursuing them.

The enemy's loss, from the best intelligence, was very considerable.

⁶⁶ Adapted from J. D. Lewis, Carolana.

https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/revolution_parkers_ferry_2.html.

⁶⁷ Ralph Cassel pension application R1791.

⁶⁸ William Smith pension application R9875.

⁶⁹ Solomon Freer pension application W8826.

⁷⁰ Capt. Archibald "Mad Archy" Campbell is said to have been the individual who captured Hayne. ,Joseph

Johnson, *Traditions and Reminiscences Chiefly of the American Revolution in the South* (Charleston: Walker & James, 1851), 362.

⁷¹<https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn83016191/1781-09-13/ed-1/seq-3>

⁷² It is extremely unlikely that Marion would have carried the equipment and taken the time to fell trees and sharpened the branches to make abattis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Michael D. Coker conducted some of the early research in this project and contributed helpful suggestions for the manuscript. The authors are grateful to David Neilan, John Oller, and John C. Parker for helpful discussions, and to John Buchanan, Paul T. Carter, Mary Jane Harris and Conner Runyan for many helpful and encouraging comments. Elisabeth Stinshoff and Marlies Felber helped in transcribing and translating a document from 18th-century German script.

C. Leon Harris earned a B.S. in physics at Virginia Tech and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in biophysics at Penn State. He taught biology, wrote textbooks, and did neurobiology research at the State University of New York, Plattsburgh for more than three decades. Since retiring to Mount Pleasant SC and Adamant VT he has authored or co-authored several papers on the Revolutionary War in the South, and has helped Will Graves transcribe almost thirty thousand Revolutionary War pension and bounty-land applications, rosters, and other documents at revwarapps.org. Recently he began publishing research papers in conjunction with Dr. Paul T. Carter's videos on the YouTube channel "@CarterOnConflict." He is honored to be one of many drawn to the study of the Revolutionary War by Charles B. Baxley's enthusiasm, high standards and humanity.

Charles B. Baxley died on March 30, 2024 after contributing to and editing several drafts of this paper until he was satisfied that it was ready to be reviewed. He was a graduate of the University of South Carolina with a bachelor's degree in political science and a doctorate in law, and he served as a captain in the US Air Force. He lived in and practiced law in Lugoff SC for 45 years and was a leader in many civic and governmental organizations. He was a recipient of South Carolina's highest civilian honor, the Order of the Palmetto. Starting in 2004 he and David P. Reuwer published the journal of the *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* and sponsored dozens of conferences, archaeological projects, roundtables and tours featuring topics on the Southern Campaigns. Baxley was appointed by the Governor as Chairman of the South Carolina American Revolution Sestercentennial Commission to guide research and commemoration of the state's role in securing American independence.

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