



Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution The JOURNAL



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Spartans

Heroic actions by simple
folks seeking freedom

INSIDE:

Thomas Sumter's Taking of
Cary's Fort
and His Surprise at Fishing
Creek in August 1780

C. Leon Harris

A publication of



The Journal

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

In South Carolina, our fields and towns are layered with history—stories of courage, sacrifice, and determination forged during the Revolutionary War. Yet for many, these stories live only in textbooks, detached from the dust, smoke, and voices that once cried out for freedom. This is where historical reenactments step in, not as mere pageantry, but as vital tools for education and heritage preservation.

When our communities gather to witness a battle reenacted on the very soil where it unfolded, history ceases to be abstract. The clash of muskets, the roll of the drum, the sight of men and women in period dress—they awaken an immediacy no



Richard C. Meehan, Jr.

printed page can match. Children see history not as a remote list of dates but as a living drama in which real people, not so different from themselves, shaped the freedoms we enjoy today.

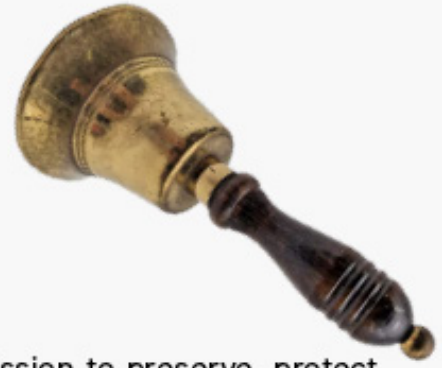
In our state, with its rich Revolutionary legacy—from the partisan campaigns of Francis Marion to the turning-point battles at Cowpens and King’s Mountain—reenactments carry an even greater responsibility. They remind us that our heritage is not a relic to be locked away but a living inheritance to be understood, debated, and celebrated.

Moreover, reenactments foster community. They draw together educators, artisans, historians, and neighbors to share in the telling of our shared past. They invite conversation across generations, building bonds through the act of remembering.

As we move forward towards the 250th celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, let us champion these events not as quaint diversions, but as vital public classrooms under open skies. Our heritage is too important to risk allowing it to fade into the quiet margins of memory. Through reenactments, South Carolina can keep its Revolutionary story alive, vivid, and ready to inspire the next generation. Champion this cause to all institutions of learning in the interest of maintaining our heritage.

~ Richard C. Meehan, Jr., Editor

Hear Ye, Hear Ye



The South Carolina American Revolution Trust is on a mission to preserve, protect and promote (into perpetuity) the stories, artifacts and history of South Carolina's role in the American Revolution. We take this work very seriously and have developed an effective system that acknowledges the donor's work, celebrates the story of your collection and honors the legacy this information represents.

We primarily work with donors that have information, stories or artifacts related to South Carolina's role in the American Revolution. The Trust exists to honor your life's work and build a repository of stories, data, facts and artifacts from this period so that this information can be preserved for and accessed by future generations.

Are you interested in donating, but have some questions? Contact us below, and we will happily answer your questions or concerns about your potential donation.

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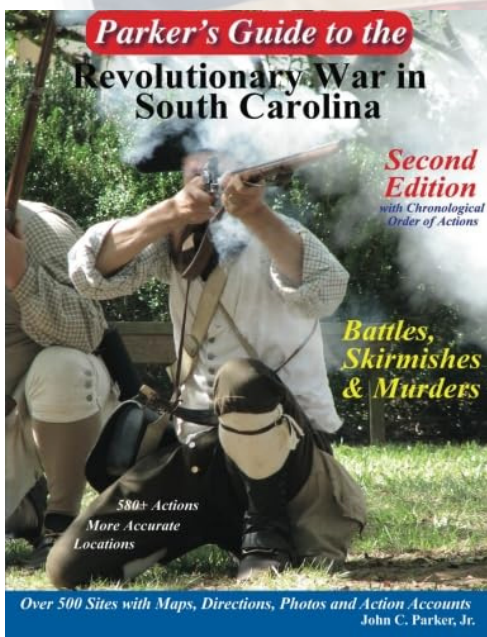


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IN MEMORIAM



John C. "Jack" Parker, Jr.
January 26, 1941 – July 17, 2025



Any serious researcher of the Revolutionary War in South Carolina, as well as many casual tourists, will be familiar with Parker's Guide to the Revolutionary War in South Carolina. Unfortunately, the author of this essential resource has passed away peacefully at his home in Patrick SC, mourned by his family and missed by so many of us who benefitted from his research.

Jack Parker was born in Wilkes-Barre, PA, raised in Delaware, and lived in Virginia, California, Colorado before moving to South Carolina. He earned a BS degree in Education at Millersville University and served four years in the U.S. Navy as Assistant Navigator on the USS Spiegel Grove, then as Navigator and Executive Officer on the USS Pitkin County. After leaving the Navy he rode and packed horses into the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area in Colorado, then lived for five years on a 43-foot yawl docked at Charleston and at times in McClellanville and Eutawville. Living in South Carolina awakened an interest in visiting Revolutionary War sites, but finding that there were few directions to them, he decided to compile his own. What he imagined would become a pamphlet turned into a book of 531 pages in its fourth edition. In recognition of his achievement he was awarded South Carolina's highest civilian honor, "The Order of the Palmetto."

Jack Parker generously bequeathed rights to Parker's Guide to the South Carolina Revolution Trust so future researchers will have the benefit of his research. A fifth edition of Parker's Guide to the Revolutionary War in South Carolina will be available in the future.

BATTLE OF CEDAR SPRINGS

Saturday, September 20, 2025 from 10 - 2

Cedar Spring Baptist Church

140 Cedar Springs Place

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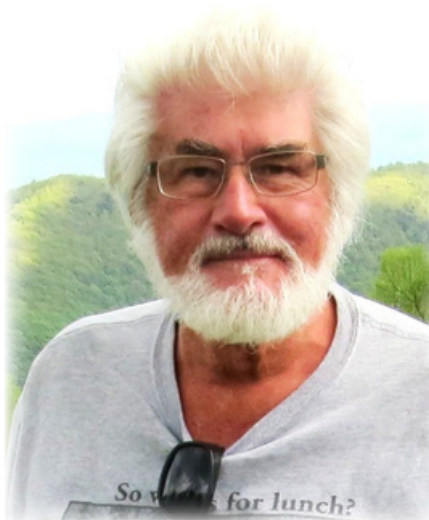
The Reverend Dr. Todd Lowe, senior pastor of Cedar Spring Baptist Church will deliver an authentic-style Revolutionary War sermon.

LUNCH OFFERED BY:

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BBQ Pork or 6 Chicken Wings +
2 Veggies + Drink = \$20/plate
or

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Moses Hall, serving under Lt. Col. Henry Lee, disclosed his mental scars in his pension statement, a rare case. Most pension applicants displayed their physical wounds in court as proof of service, yet few revealed their mental injuries (<https://revwarapps.org/w10105.pdf>).

At twenty, Hall was on his ninth tour as a militiaman when, on February 25, 1781, near what is now Burlington, North Carolina, he participated in Pyle's Massacre. Dr. John Pyle's mounted Loyalist militia was waiting for Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's British Legion, but instead encountered Lee's Legion. Both units wore green jackets, and Lee quickly set out to deceive Pyle's men. Moses Hall offered this testimony:

Colonel Lee and Officers kept up the deception and Colonel Lee and his Light Horse marching in one column or line, and Major or Colonel Dixons command in another; some interval apart, the Tories passed into this interval, between our lines.... They frequently uttered salutations of a friendly kind believing us to be British.... the bugle sounded to attack and the slaughter began. The Tories crying out "your own men, your own men, as good subjects of his Majesty has in America." It was said that upwards of two hundred of these Tories were slain on the ground.

But it was not this slaughter that horrified Hall as much as what happened that evening.

We having a considerable number of prisoners I recollect a scene which made a lasting impression upon my mind. I was invited by some of my comrades



The Dragon

by
C. Leon Harris

to go and see some of the prisoners. We went to where six were standing together. Some discussion taking place, I heard some of our men cry out "remember Bluford" [the massacre of Col. Abraham Buford's troops by Tarleton's men at Waxhaws] and the prisoners were immediately hewed to pieces with broad swords. At first I bore the scene without any emotion, but, upon a moments reflection I felt such horror as I never did before nor have since. And returning to my quarters and throwing myself upon my blanket I contemplated the cruelties of war until overcome and unmanned by a distressing gloom.

What Hall saw the next morning before daylight closed his mental wound, leaving only the scar.

Being on the left of the road as we marched along I discovered lying upon the ground something like the appearance of a man. Upon approaching him he proved to be a youth about sixteen who having come out to view the British through curiosity for fear he might give information to our troops they had run him through with a bayonet & left him for dead, though able to speak he was mortally wounded. The sight of this unoffending boy butchered rather than be encumbered in the least on the march, as I suppose, released me of my distress and feelings for the slaughter of the Tories and I desired nothing so much as the opportunity of participating in their destruction.





**Jane Black Thomas and the Legend of Her Midnight Ride
in July 1780**

The Spartan Regiment in a Nutshell

by

Richard C. Meehan, Jr.

The Spartan Regiment was a tough, locally formed militia that bravely fought to defend South Carolina's backcountry during the American Revolution. Named after the legendary Spartan warriors of ancient Greece, the regiment was built on grit, independence, and a strong dedication to liberty. The city of Spartanburg takes its name from this remarkable group of citizen-soldiers. The word "burg" means "fortified town." Since many of the residents of the Pacolet River Valley were Scots-Irish extended families related to the organizer of the regiment, it is easy to understand why the name "burg" became fitting.

Founded at Wofford's Iron Works on August 2, 1775, under Colonel John Thomas Sr., the regiment held its first muster in what is now Glendale, Spartanburg. It brought together about 200 local farmers, artisans, and former rangers. These men weren't professional soldiers—they had no uniforms and weren't paid—but they trained regularly, brought their own horses and rifles, and learned tactics to prepare for both traditional battles and guerrilla warfare.

JANE THOMAS' MIDNIGHT RIDE

One of the regiment's earliest notable moments was marked by Jane Black Thomas's bravery. Legend says that while visiting her imprisoned husband, Colonel John Thomas Sr., at Fort Ninety Six in July 1780, she overheard a Loyalist plan to ambush the Patriot camp at Cedar Springs, the latest training area of the Spartan Regiment. Jane, at fifty-seven years old, rode 60 miles through the rugged backcountry at night to warn her son, Colonel John Thomas Jr., who had taken over command of the regiment in his father's absence. Thanks to her warning, the small force of about 60 Patriots was prepared. Leaving bedrolls around the cook fires, they hid in the surrounding woods. At daybreak, a party of 150 Loyalists attacked the camp. Turning the tables, the Spartans surprised the attackers with a deadly volley from the woods and drove them off without losing a single man.

HOLDING THE LINE AT WOFFORD'S IRON WORKS

Just weeks later, on August 8, 1780, the regiment helped defend Wofford's Iron Works from another Loyalist attack. With support from Overmountain Men from nearby colonies, the Spartans held their ground against British dragoons and militia under the command of British Major Patrick Ferguson. Although they eventually had to retreat, the Spartans inflicted heavy losses and protected vital supplies, living to fight another day.

TURNING POINT AT KINGS MOUNTAIN

The regiment's most decisive moment came on October 7, 1780, at the Battle of Kings Mountain. Alongside other Patriot militias, the Spartans helped surround and defeat Major Patrick Ferguson's Loyalist forces on a steep ridge. Using their frontier marksmanship and terrain

knowledge, they forced over 900 enemy troops to surrender. It was a stunning victory that shifted momentum in the southern colonies.

VICTORY AT COWPENS

On January 17, 1781, the Spartan Regiment fought again at Cowpens, one of the most important American victories of the war. They helped execute a strategic feigned retreat that lured British forces into a trap. More than 600 enemy soldiers were taken prisoner in the rout, which dealt a significant blow to the British campaign.

FIGHTING IN THE SHADOWS

Even after the major battles, the Spartan Regiment kept pressing on. They conducted nighttime raids, monitored enemy movements, and disrupted supply lines. Their guerrilla tactics tied down British forces and helped lead to the final American victory at Yorktown.

REMEMBERING THEIR LEGACY

Today, markers at Cedar Springs, Wofford's Iron Works, Kings Mountain, and Cowpens honor the Spartan Regiment's service. Annual reenactments and local museums keep their stories alive, and students across the Upstate continue to learn about these tough, determined fighters. In many ways, the spirit of the Spartan Regiment—ordinary people doing extraordinary things for freedom—still lives on in the place that bears their name.

Visit the [Battle of Cedar Springs Reenactment](#) and Memorial Ceremony, 140 Cedar Springs Place, on September 20th from 10 am – 2 pm if you would like to learn more about Spartanburg's Revolutionary War legacy.

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THOMAS SUMTER'S TAKING OF CARY'S FORT AND HIS SURPRISE AT FISHING CREEK IN AUGUST 1780

by
C. Leon Harris

Thomas Sumter is justly remembered as a great South Carolina military leader in the struggle against tyranny, but few recall any of the conflicts in which he fought. One engagement that Sumter was justly proud of was the capture of Cary's Fort by his troops on August 15, 1780. One that he might have preferred to be forgotten occurred at Fishing Creek three days later, when he was caught napping and half-dressed by Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton.

SOUTH CAROLINA IN THE SUMMER OF 1780

By 1779, the British under General Sir Henry Clinton were stalemated in the North, so they turned their attention to the South. On May 12, 1780, Clinton captured the city of Charlestown, taking virtually the entire Continental army of the South prisoners and releasing captured militiamen as prisoners on parole—sworn to remain neutral.¹ The British soon extended their hold throughout South Carolina, utilizing a chain of posts, including ones at Ninety Six, Rocky Mount, and Camden. (Fig. 1)

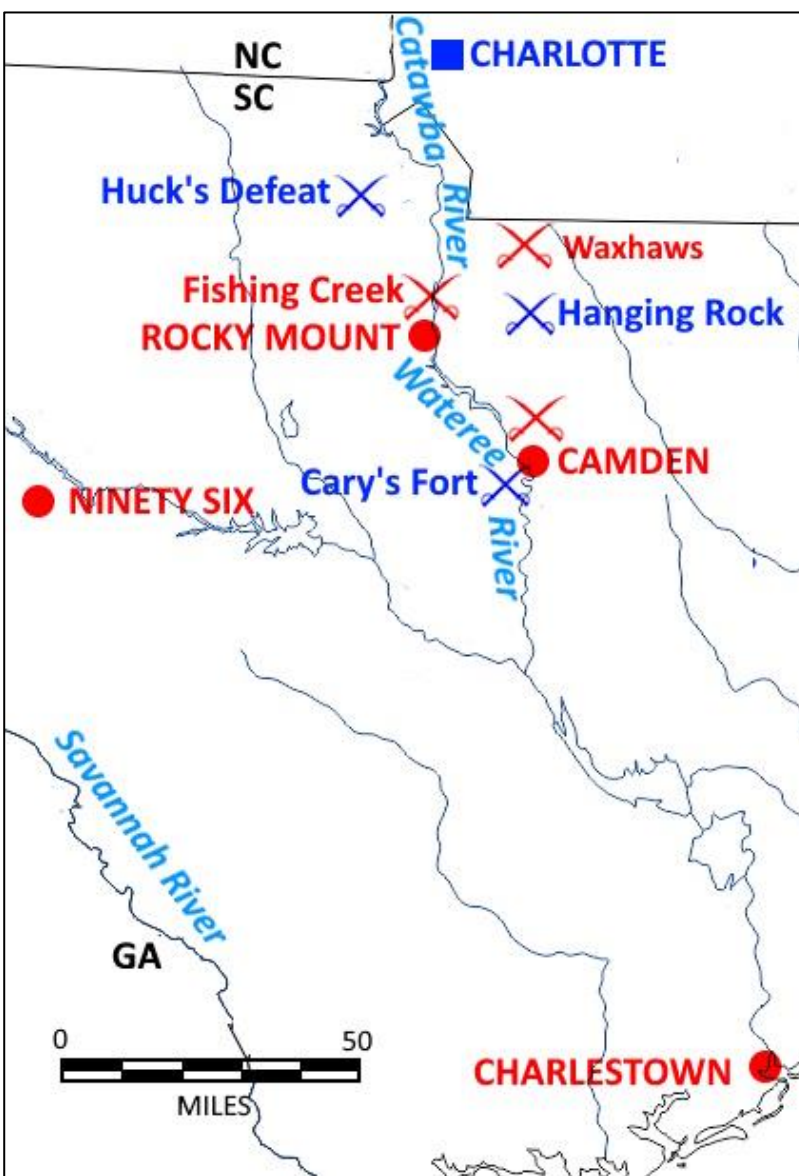


FIGURE 1. OUTLINE MAP OF PART OF SOUTH CAROLINA SHOWING MAJOR LOCATIONS MENTIONED IN THIS PAPER. AMERICAN POSTS AND VICTORIES ARE SHOWN IN BLUE, BRITISH IN RED. IN THIS AND OTHER MAPS IN THIS PAPER, NORTH IS TOWARD THE TOP.

¹ For concise descriptions of this and other actions mentioned in this paper, see Patrick O'Kelley, *Nothing but Blood and Slaughter* Vol. 3. (Lillington, NC: Booklocker.com, 2005); John C. Parker, Jr., *Parker's Guide to the Revolutionary War in South Carolina*, 4th ed. (Columbia, SC: Harrelson Press, 2022); and J. D. Lewis, "The Known Battles & Skirmishes in South Carolina,"

https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/SC_Revolutionary_War_Known_Battles_Skirmishes.htm. There are two standard biographies of Sumter: Anne King Gregorie, *Thomas Sumter* (Columbia, SC: R. L. Bryan Co., 1931) and Robert D. Bass, *Gamecock: The Life and Campaigns of Thomas Sumter* (Orangeburg, SC: Sandlapper, 1961).

In early June, Clinton returned to New York confident that South Carolina had been subdued, leaving General Charles, Lord Cornwallis, in command. Clinton's confidence soon proved to be unfounded, largely due to two mistakes. The first was his confusing proclamation on June 3, 1780, which both sides interpreted as revoking paroles and forcing militiamen to fight for the British against their former comrades. Many instead chose to return to the Patriot cause.

The second mistake was the brutal treatment of the Patriots by their Loyalist neighbors, militias, and provincial troops—residents of America trained and equipped like British regulars. Among the provincials was the British Legion of cavalry and infantry under Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton. On May 29, 1780, at Waxhaws, Tarleton's Legion "cut to pieces" Virginia Continental soldiers under Col. Abraham Buford as they were surrendering.

News of the slaughter at Waxhaws, or the abuse of Sumter's wife by Tarleton's men on the way to the Waxhaws, may explain why the forty-five-year-old Sumter resumed his military service after having retired two years earlier.² By late spring of 1780, Sumter was ten miles west of Charlotte at Tuckasegee Ford on the Catawba River, where many other refugees from South Carolina joined him. Although referred to as militiamen, they were not ordered into service, and they did not expect to be paid except with plunder from Loyalists. They used their own arms and horses and dressed in hunting clothes rather than uniforms. These volunteers were soon joined by North Carolina militiamen fresh from a victory at Ramsour's Mill on June 20. Sumter moved his headquarters to Clems Branch 14 miles south of Charlotte on land of Catawba Indian allies. There, the volunteers elected him "general,"³ but he was not formally commissioned a general of the South Carolina militia until the following October.

In the words of Archibald McCorkle, "in a short time Sumpter's force had augmented so rapidly that he no longer stood on the defensive but began that rapid succession of offensive warfare that so signalises that short span of time from about the first of July untill the 16 or 17 of August."⁴

On June 30 Cornwallis boasted to Clinton that "a detachment of dragoons and militia from Lt Colonel [George] Turnbull put an end to all resistance in South Carolina,"⁵ but Sumter soon proved him wrong. Cornwallis had to inform Clinton that some of Sumter's troops on July 12 had defeated Capt. Christian Huck and some of Tarleton's Legion, who had been sent by Turnbull to drive off some "violent rebels."⁶ On July 30 Sumter came close to capturing Turnbull and the post at Rocky Mount by igniting the roof, but rain put out the fire. On August 6 Sumter defeated Loyalist militia and provincials at Hanging Rock.⁷ After this success Sumter wrote, "Both British and Tories are

² C. Leon Harris, "Did Tarleton Burn Sumter's Home on the Way to the Battle of Waxhaws?" *The Journal of the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* 25, no. 1 (April 2025), 9-25.

https://southern-campaigns.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/JournalVol20_No1_3-25.pdf

³ Pension applications of William Clark W8610

<http://revwarapps.org/w8610.pdf> and James Clinton S2437 <http://revwarapps.org/s2437.pdf>. These and other pension applications cited in this paper are transcribed mainly by Will Graves at <https://revwarapps.org>.

⁴ Archibald McCorkle S2771

<https://revwarapps.org/s2771.pdf>.

⁵ Cornwallis to Clinton, June 30, 1780, in Ian Saberton, ed., *The Cornwallis Papers* 6 Vols. (hereafter *CP*) (East Sussex, UK: Naval & Military Press, 2010), 1:161.

⁶ Cornwallis to Clinton, July 15, 1780, *CP* 1:170. Michael C. Scoggins, *The Day it Rained Militia: Huck's Defeat and the Revolution in the South Carolina Backcountry May-July 1780* (Charleston SC: History Press, 2005).

⁷ C. Leon Harris, "Thomas Sumter at Rocky Mount and Hanging Rock: 'A Great Victory Scarcely Ever Heard Of'," (academia.edu, 2004).

https://www.academia.edu/116805346/Thomas_Sumter_at_Rocky_Mount_and_Hanging_Rock_South_Carolina_A_Great_Victory_Scarcely_Ever_Heard_Of

pannick struck, and I am well Convinced that fifteen hundred men can go through any part of the State with ease.”⁸ The British abandoned Rocky Mount and Hanging Rock, and Sumter’s force grew to about 500 men.⁹

Meanwhile, a new southern army had been raised to reclaim South Carolina. This new army included Continental soldiers from Maryland and Delaware, the legion of Lt. Col. Charles Armand, and militiamen from North Carolina and Virginia, all under Gen. Horatio Gates, who had commanded at the American victory at Saratoga on October 17, 1777. After learning of Gates’s march, Cornwallis hurried from Charlestown to take personal command of British troops at Camden, where he arrived on August 14.¹⁰

THE CAPTURE OF CARY’S FORT, AUGUST 15, 1780

On his way southward, Gates sent Sumter’s five hundred troops to Waxhaws and reinforced them with three hundred North Carolina militiamen, a hundred Maryland and Delaware Continentals, some of Armand’s Legion, and a detachment of the Virginia Continental Artillery with two three-pounder cannons.¹¹ Gates then ordered them down the Wateree River to block Cornwallis’s routes to the west and intercept supplies from Ninety Six.¹² On August 15, Sumter reported to Gates:

*Early this morning, I took possession of all the passways over the Wateree river, from Elkins’ ford to Mr. Whitear’s ferry, five miles below Camden. The enemy had guards at many different places upon the river, all of which were evacuated last night or this morning, and the guards ordered into Camden, except those at Wateree ferry.*¹³

Wateree Ferry, the major crossing to Camden from the west, was guarded by troops at a fort on land belonging to Loyalist Col. James Cary.¹⁴ Cary had a checkered career. One senior British officer accused him of corruption. Cornwallis responded that he would “answer with my life for Carey,” but eventually he had to concede that, “however loyal he may be, he certainly is not much

⁸ Thomas Sumter to Maj. Thomas Pinckney (Aide-de-Camp to Gen. Horatio Gates), August 9, 1780, Colonial and State Records of North Carolina 14, 542,

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.php/document/csr14-0437>.

⁹ Gates to the President of Congress, August 20, 1780, in Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781, in the Southern Provinces of North America* (Dublin: Colles, et al., 1787), 148-149.

Sumter to Pinckney, August 9, 1780, Colonial and State Records of North Carolina, 14, 540.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.php/document/csr14-0437>.

¹⁰ Cornwallis to Lord George Germain, August 21, 1780, in Tarleton, *History*, 132-133.

¹¹ “Three-pounder” refers to the weight of the cannon ball. Contingents of the Delaware Continentals and Armand’s Legion are usually not mentioned, but they are listed in the official record of prisoners, as shown by Jim Piecuch, “British Casualty Reports Shed Light on Sumter’s Early Partisan Actions.” *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* 20, no. 3.0 (August 20, 2023): 10, <https://www.southern-campaigns.org/wp->. For the Virginia Continental Artillery see John Blair VAS2517, <https://revwarapps.org/VAS2517.pdf>.

¹² Gates to the President of Congress, August 20, 1780, in Tarleton, *History*, 149.

¹³ Sumter to Gates, August 15, 1780, in Tarleton, *History*, 151.

¹⁴ Often spelled Carey, but a letter from him to Turnbull dated September 18, 1780, (CP 2:236) is signed without the e. For a biography of Cary see Ian Saberton, “Biographical Sketches of Royal Militia Commanders in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1780-1782,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, November 30, 2020, <https://allthingsliberty.com/2020/11/biographical-sketches-of-royal-militia-commanders-in-the-south-carolina-backcountry-1780-82/>.

of a soldier.”¹⁵ Almost a century later, Cary was described as “a man of education, character and position, a conscientious Royalist.” (See the Appendix at the end of this paper.)

Cary’s Fort was west of Wateree Ferry on land that South Carolina seized after the war and sold to William Whitaker.¹⁶ It is reasonable to suppose that the fort was on relatively high ground near the road to the ferry. The ferry and old roads no longer exist, but their locations can be estimated from Mills Atlas, which is based on an 1820 survey. Mills Atlas shows a nearby house of a Whitaker, presumably the same William Whitaker who bought the land confiscated from Cary. (Fig. 2)

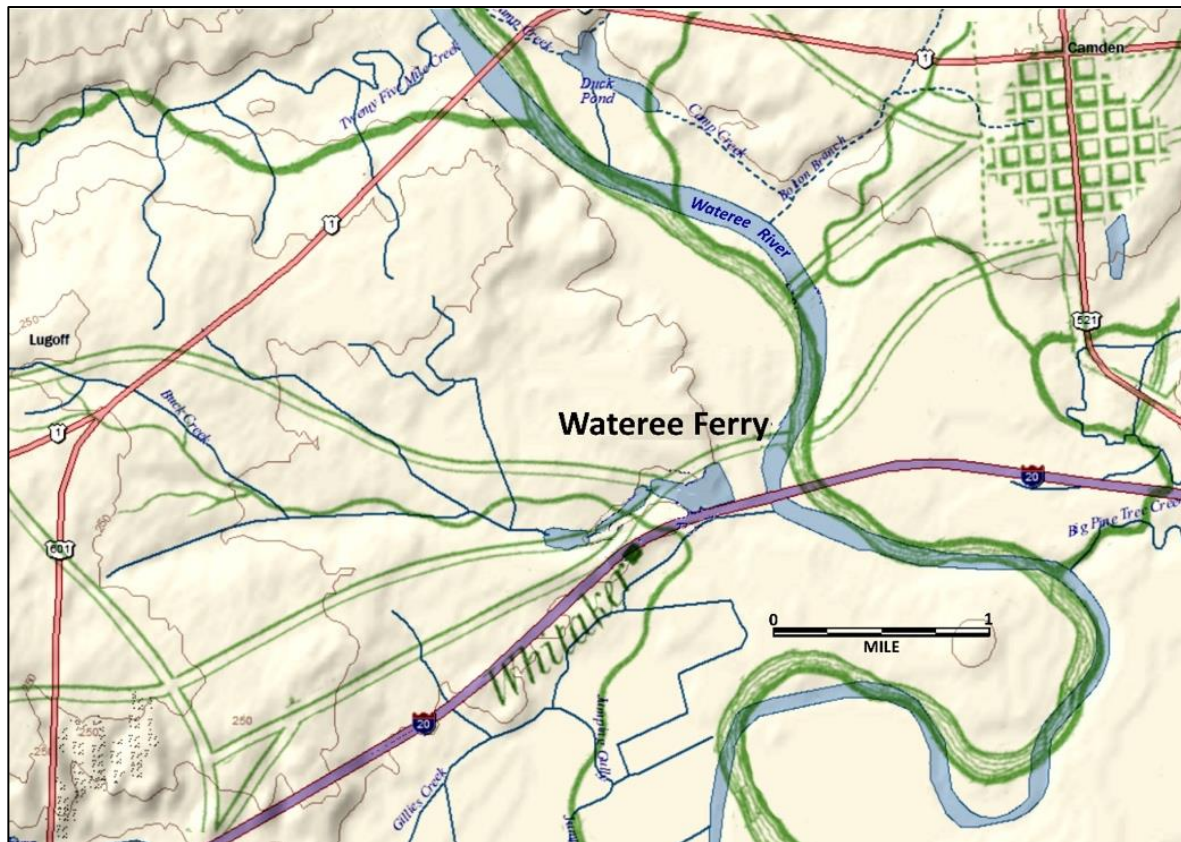


FIGURE 2. PART OF THE 1825 MILLS ATLAS (RECOLORED GREEN) SHOWING THE ROAD TO WATEREE FERRY AND CAMDEN OVERLAID ONTO A MODERN TOPOGRAPHIC MAP (TOPOUSA). JOHN ALLISON AND CHARLES B. BAXLEY DEDUCED THAT CARY’S FORT WAS LOCATED NEAR WHERE THE WHITAKER HOUSE IS SHOWN.

¹⁵ Lt. Col. Nisbet Balfour to Cornwallis, September 1, 1780, *CP* 2:69-70. Cornwallis to Balfour, September 3, 1780, *CP* 2:72. Balfour to Cornwallis, November 17, 1780, *CP* 3:85. Cornwallis to Lt. Col. Francis, Lord Rawdon, December 12, 1780, *CP* 3:207.

¹⁶ James Cary plats for 402, 335 and 100 acres, 1783. South Carolina Department of Archives and History. <https://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/>. UK Loyalist Claim for James Cary on ancestry.com, https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/3712/images/40939_307058-00761?treeid=&personid=&queryId=ac8252cf-a439-46b6-bb20-b639a789677c&usePUB=true&_phsrc=MSm1963&_phstart=successSource&pId=19138 and pages following. “William Whitaker To Com’rs. of the Treasury/ Deed of Mortgage dated 3d July 1783. South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

Zach Lemhouse at the Southern Revolutionary War Institute in York, SC, later found a more detailed description from 1874:

His “fort” was on the west side of the Wateree river about 900 yards from the Ferry on the Columbia road just at the Forks of the road running up the river to Winsboro [Winnsboro]. Commanding both roads. And a very defensible position, being on Shady[?] Hill, with a small creek covering its front, flank and rear. It was on the “Whitaker plantation,” and their burying ground is just behind it.¹⁷

A plat for one of Cary’s tracts shows a house on “High Land” south of the “Road from McCords Ferry to Camden.”¹⁸ (Fig. 3) An overlay of the plat reveals that the house was near where the Whitaker house appears on Mills Atlas. Cary’s Fort may have been this house, possibly enclosed by a palisade of upright logs or an abattis of sharpened tree limbs. All this information suggests that Cary’s Fort was roughly where the house is shown in Figure 4.



FIGURE 3. DETAIL FROM A 1783 PLAT OF JAMES CARY’S 335-ACRE TRACT.

John Allison and Charles B. Baxley had little of this evidence but guided by their knowledge of a suitable site for a fort and a brief description and rough sketch made in 1880,¹⁹ they searched that area. Allison confirmed the location by finding six rifle balls that had been fired and three that had not been fired. (Fig. 4)

Despite the security of the fort, Cary and his men surrendered to Sumter’s men after some skirmishing. One participant stated that the Americans used a “hot ball”—a heated cannonball.²⁰ Sumter wrote to Gates on August 15 that Cary’s men were “surprised by a party of my men” under Colonels Thomas Taylor and Edward Lacey, “who killed seven, and took about thirty prisoners,

¹⁷ Edward Boykin to Lyman C. Draper, March 13, 1874 in Draper’s Sumter Papers 17VV239-240.

¹⁸ James Cary 1783 plat for 335 acres provided by South Carolina Department of Archives and History. McCord’s Ferry on Congaree River was 32 miles south of Cary’s Fort.

¹⁹ From Edward Boykin to Lyman C. Draper.

²⁰ Benjamin Copeland S21122
<https://revwarapps.org/s21122.pdf>.

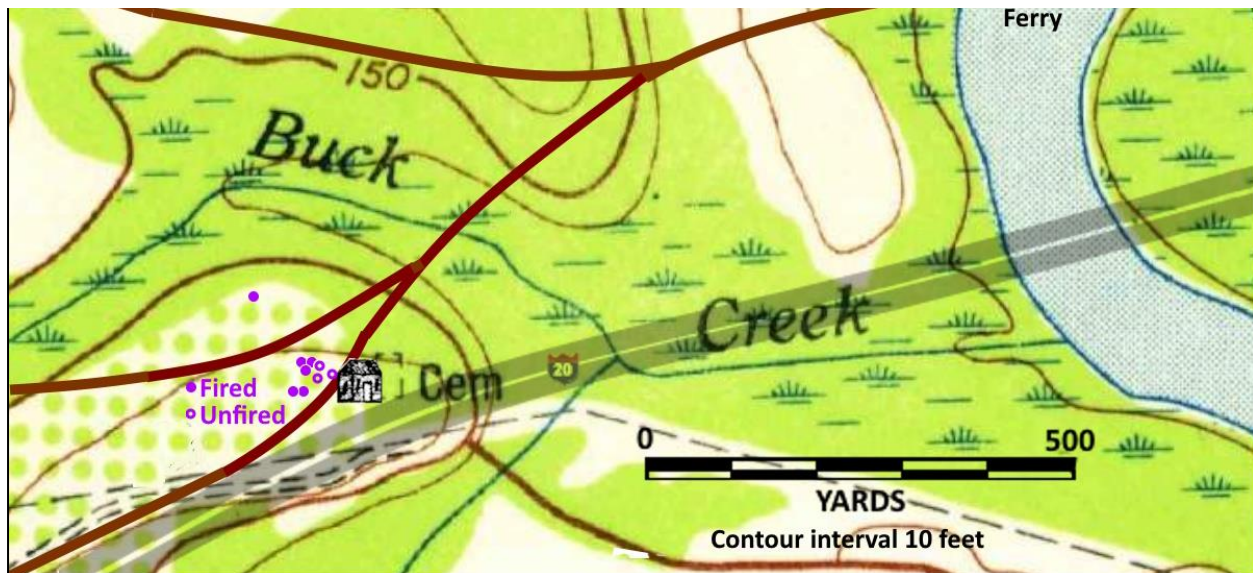


FIGURE 4. LOCATION OF BULLETS FOUND BY JOHN ALLISON AND THE PROBABLE LOCATION OF CARY'S FORT SHOWN ON THE 1953 USGS LUGOFF QUADRANGLE. THE IMAGE OF CARY'S FORT, AFTERWARD WILLIAM WHITAKER'S HOUSE, IS OVERLAID FROM FIGURE 4. THE LATER ROUTE OF INTERSTATE 20 IS SHOWN IN LIGHT GRAY. THE OLD ROADS AT THE TIME OF THE SKIRMISH (BROWN) ARE INFERRED FROM MILLS ATLAS AND POSSIBLE TRACES ON LIDAR IMAGERY.

among which was Colonel Cary, the commander, together with thirty-eight waggons, loaded with corn, rum, &c. also a number of horses.”²¹ Sumter hadn't finished his report to Gates about the capture of Cary's Fort when more good news arrived. He added in a postscript: “I have the pleasure to inform your excellency, that I have this instant made about seventy prisoners, all British, six waggons, baggage, &c. just from Ninety Six; many of the prisoners are sick.”²²

Hicks Chappell, who was acting as a lieutenant, apparently described this event fifty-two years later, but with different numbers.

*On the same day that Carey was taken, this deponent was sent off to reconnoiter & give intelligence of the advance of a Reinforcement of British Troops said to be marching from 96 to Camden, he had but two men with him, & discovering the British advancing, their arms being in the waggons he & his party secreted themselves until the British came up, when suddenly rushing upon them he took the whole party consisting of about fifty men & two waggons & carried them safely in to his party without firing a Gun.*²³

²¹ Sumter to Gates, August 15, 1780, in Tarleton, *History*, 151. William Hamilton, audited account SC785 (<https://revwarapps.org/sc785.pdf>) also stated that Cary's men were surprised.

²² Sumter to Gates, August 15, 1780, in Tarleton, *History*, 152.

²³ Hicks Chappell W22758

<https://revwarapps.org/w22758.pdf>. Edward Doyle S32216 gave the number of wagons as five or six, and Hardy Lassiter S4514 gave the number as thirteen.

<https://revwarapps.org/s32216.pdf> and

According to Tarleton, in the capture of Cary's Fort and the detachment from Ninety Six, Sumter "had taken above one hundred British soldiers, he had secured one hundred and fifty loyal American militia, and he had captured near fifty waggons loaded with arms, stores, and ammunition."²⁴

SUMTER'S RETREAT TO FISHING CREEK

At 10 p.m., in the night following Sumter's capture of Cary's Fort, Gates marched his troops southward, intending to eventually attack the British at Camden. At the same time, Cornwallis marched his troops northward to attack Gates. The two armies collided in the early hours of August 16 about eight miles north of Camden. At dawn, they formed their lines for battle, with results that are not surprising after the Americans' exhausting march and the soldiers having nothing to eat but unripe corn, green peaches, and molasses. The Virginia militiamen on the left could not stand against British regular soldiers with bayonets. After the Virginians fled, the North Carolina militiamen in the middle of the line soon followed, leaving the Maryland and Delaware Continentals in a futile struggle for survival. News of the disastrous Battle of Camden reached Sumter at Wateree Ferry within hours. That evening, he began withdrawing up the west side of the river toward the safety of North Carolina, slowed by plunder and prisoners. Some of the prisoners, including Cary, escaped along the way. Near Rocky Mount, Sumter detached men from Capt. John Steele's militia company to finish the job he had begun on June 30—burning the post at Rocky Mount.²⁵

British Major Patrick Ferguson gave the following account of Sumter's retreat:

*We are inform'd that Sumpter on the evening of the 16th retreated from Colonel Carry's towards Rocky Mount and march'd all that night and the next, accompany'd by Carry's militia, a party of Graham's light infantry, six of Graham's baggage waggons and twenty seven other waggons from the Congaree loaded with some rum and indian corn, all of which they had taken on this side of Cambden. Sumpter had some hundreds of Virginia [sic] Continentals with him.*²⁶

Ferguson added the following prediction: "It is probable [they] will fall into Colonel Tarleton's hands." Cornwallis anticipated Sumter's retreat, and on the evening following the Battle of Camden, he sent Turnbull, Ferguson, and Loyalist militia in pursuit of Sumter from Little River, more than sixty miles to the west. Tarleton followed from the Camden battlefield on the morning of August 17 with his British Legion, light infantry under Capt. Charles Campbell of the 71st Regiment, and a three-pounder.

Lieutenant-colonel Tarleton was desired to harass or strike at Colonel Sumpter, as he should find it most advisable when he approached him. For this purpose he directed his course next morning through the woods, with three hundred and fifty men and one piece of cannon, and marched up the east side of the Wateree, intending to pass it at or near Rocky Mount."²⁷

<https://revwarapps.org/s4514.pdf>.

²⁴ Tarleton, *History*, 116.

²⁵ William McGarity R6713 <https://revwarapps.org/r6713.pdf>

²⁶ Maj. Patrick Ferguson to Capt. Ross, August 19, 1780, *CP* 2:140.

²⁷ Tarleton, *History*, 114-115.

Tarleton, with his characteristic speed, was the first to find Sumter's troops after riding some 20 miles up the east side of the Wateree River to where it became the Catawba River. There, "at dusk, he perceived the enemy's fires about a mile distant from the opposite shore."²⁸ (Fig. 5)

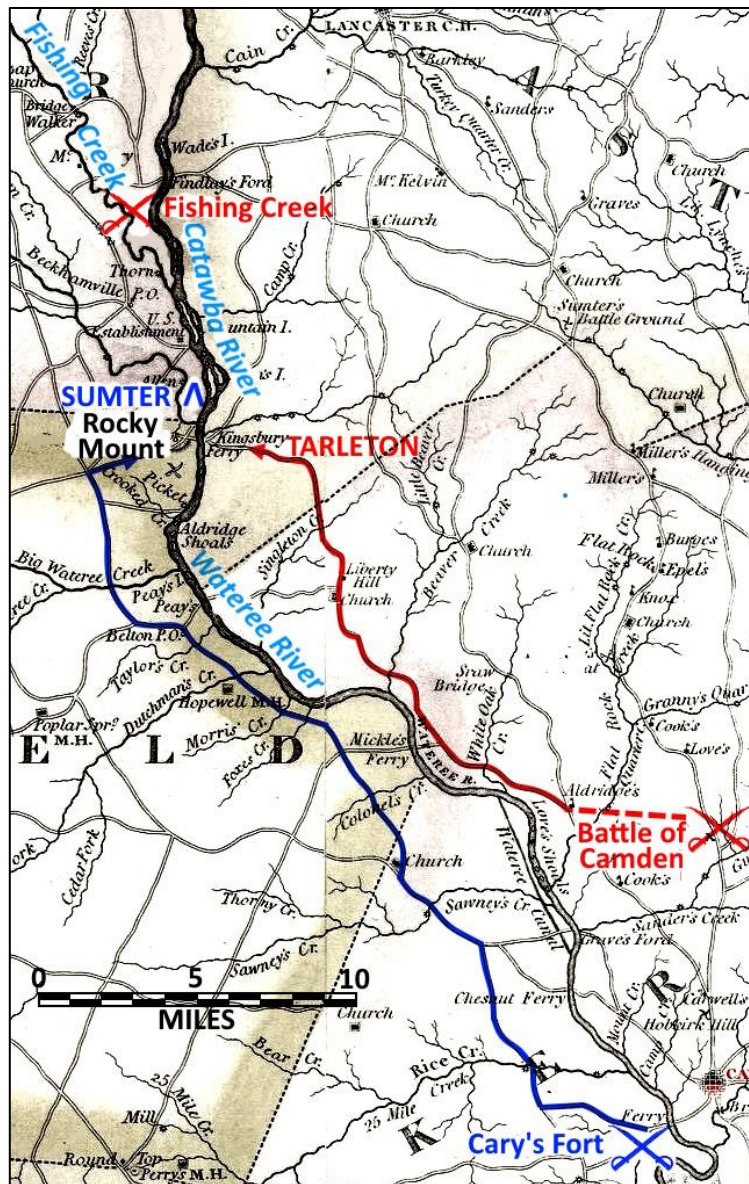


FIGURE 5. SUMTER'S RETREAT FROM CARY'S FORT TO ROCKY MOUNT (BLUE) AND TARLETON'S PURSUIT (RED), ASSUMED TO BE MAINLY ON ROADS ON JOHN WILSON'S 1822 MAP OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

On the morning of August 18, Tarleton sent a small party under Capt. Campbell to the top of Rocky Mount to signal with a white handkerchief if Sumter had broken camp and continued northward. On seeing Campbell's signal, Tarleton made the difficult crossing to the west side of the Catawba River. "After the passage was effected, a patrol of legion dragoons was directed to proceed a few miles to the westward, to inquire after Turnbull and Ferguson; but no intelligence

²⁸ Tarleton, *History*, 115.

was obtained.”²⁹ In spite of having only about half as many men as Sumter, Tarleton continued his pursuit. On the way, Tarleton’s men killed guards who had been left with one or two of Sumter’s wagons that had broken down.³⁰

The long march in the August heat took a toll on Tarleton’s men.

*When Tarleton arrived at Fishing Creek at noon, he found the majority of his command exhausted by fatigue; the corps could no longer be moved forward in a cohesive and effective state. He therefore decided to split the cavalry and infantry capable of enduring more hardship to pursue the enemy, while the rest, with the three-pounder, took position on a strategic piece of ground to rest and to cover the retreat should an emergency arise. The number chosen to continue the pursuit did not exceed one hundred legion dragoons and sixty foot soldiers. The light infantry provided a large proportion of the latter.*³¹

Tarleton was now outmanned four-to-one by Sumter, but still he persisted, following the tracks of Sumter’s horses and wagons along the high ridge between Fishing Creek to his left and Catawba River on his right on a road corresponding to the present Catawba River Road (US 21).

SUMTER’S REST

Sumter’s men were also suffering from the long retreat and heat, so late in the morning, he decided to rest. The location where Sumter rested, and therefore the site of the skirmish, has not been confirmed by archaeology, but it is suggested by Tarleton’s statement that the vedettes “fired upon the advanced guard as it entered a valley,” and that some of his men “afterwards approached the summit of the neighbouring eminence.” In addition, Mills

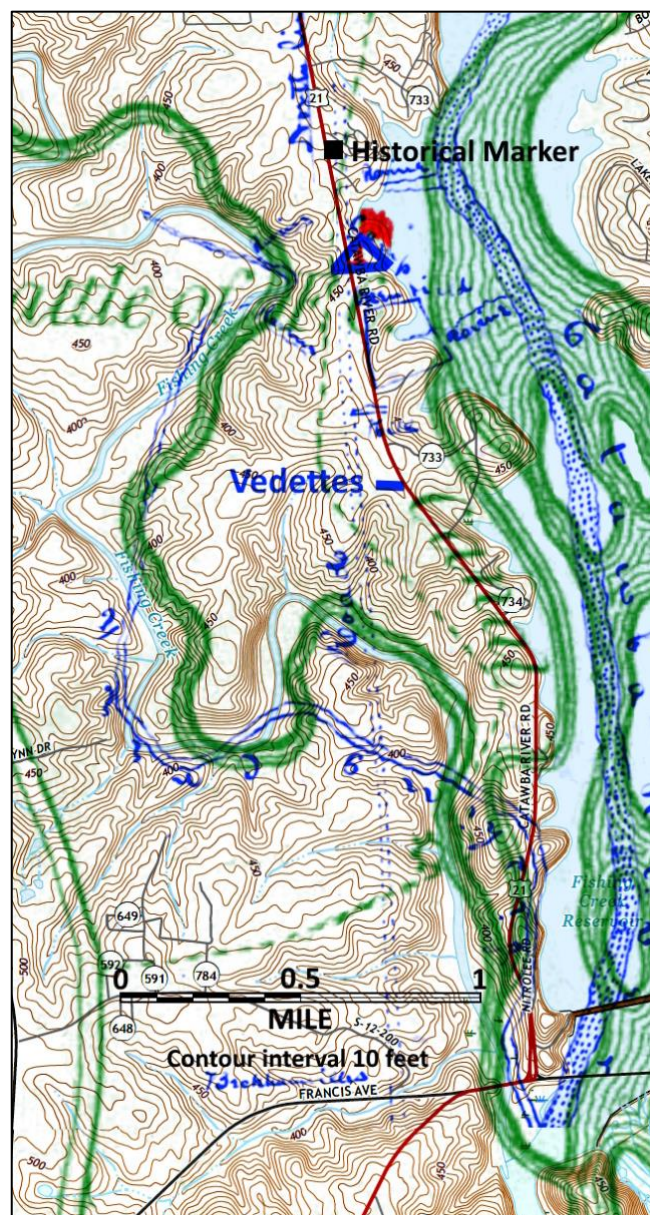


FIGURE 6. PART OF MILLS ATLAS (GREEN) AND STINSON’S SKETCH (BLUE) OVERLAID ONTO THE CURRENT USGS MAP (GREAT FALLS AND FORT LAWN QUADRANGLES). THE FLAG SYMBOL FROM MILLS ATLAS (RECOLORED RED) AND THE TRIANGLE FROM STINSON’S SKETCH INDICATE THE LOCATIONS OF THE SKIRMISH AND SUMTER’S CAMP.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Zachary Kitchens R5999
<https://revwarapps.org/r5999.pdf>.

³¹ Tarleton, *History*, 116-117.

Atlas for Chester District shows “Battle of F. C.” with a flag symbol just east of a prominent bend in Fishing Creek. A sketch by local historian Daniel G. Stinson sent to Lyman C. Draper in 1871 shows Sumter’s “camp” as a triangle in nearly the same place.³² (Fig. 6) This location is about three-tenths of a mile south of the present historical marker. Sumter may have chosen this narrowest part of the ridge as it was easiest to defend against cavalry and provided easy access to water.

The following description by Stinson, based on unnamed sources and published in 1850, agrees with that location.

*Sumter’s army was posted in the stronghold of Fishing Creek, two miles from its junction with the Catawba, where a bend in stream and river leaves a ridge of elevated ground between them from which both can be seen. In front and rear of this space deep ravines run from the river and the creek, leaving a narrow strip along which the road passes, while below, the road left the ridge and entered a valley opening to the creek with steep hills on either side.*³³

Pension applicants recalled five decades later that “a great many of our troops were pulling Peiches & Roasting years & many of them much fatigued & lying on the ground resting,” and “some asleep..., some were bathing in the river,” and “washing their cloths.” Another stated that “the men were engaged in drinking—having just taken two hogsheads of Rum from some Tories who were conveying it to the British.”³⁴ According to Samuel Martin, “General Sumter was lying under one of the Wagons, and his horse was tied by a rope near at hand.”³⁵ Protected on two sides by steep declivities to the creek and river, and with the river between him and Cornwallis, Sumter and his men evidently felt safe. Still Sumter took the precaution of posting mounted guards (vedettes) to the south.³⁶

Some pension applicants blamed the vedettes for the subsequent defeat. According to Hardy Lassiter:

The cause of this defeat was attributed to a Colonel in our troops, whose name declarant does not remember. He was ordered by Gen. Sumter to place out a guard when we halted as above stated, about three fourths of a mile lower down than where the body of the troops were, but it appeared he had neglected to obey the orders, owing

³² Draper’s Thomas Sumter Papers 9VV54, reprinted in Michael Scoggins, *Relentless Fury: The Revolutionary War in the Southern Piedmont* (Rock Hill SC: Culture and Heritage Museums, 2006), 49. Samuel Dunlap S3310 in 1833 also stated that the skirmish occurred “about two miles from the mouth of Fishing Creek on the Catawba River,” <https://revwarapps.org/s3310.pdf>. Several other pension applicants stated that the skirmish occurred at the mouth of Fishing Creek. Another account published in 1859 stated that “Sumpter encamped on the main road, near the creek; we were encamped a short distance above, on his left, where another road crossed the creek.” James Potter Collins, *Autobiography of a Revolutionary Soldier*, revised and prepared by John M. Roberts (Clinton LA: Feliciana Democrat, 1859), 41-42. No such crossroad appears on Mills Atlas or other early maps.

³³ Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution*, Vol. 3 (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 101.

³⁴ Edward Doyle S32216

<https://revwarapps.org/s32216.pdf>; David McCance S16464 <https://revwarapps.org/s16464.pdf>; Zachary Kitchens R5999 <https://revwarapps.org/r5999.pdf>; Samuel Martin S2727 <https://revwarapps.org/s2727.pdf>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ David McCance S16464

<https://revwarapps.org/s16464.pdf>.

*as was afterwards said, to his being friendly to the British, and a traitor to his country.*³⁷

If the defeat was the fault of the vedettes, they paid dearly for it, according to Tarleton:

*Two of the enemy's vedettes, who were concealed behind some bushes, fired upon the advanced guard as it entered a valley and killed a dragoon of the legion: A circumstance which irritated the foremost of his comrades to such a degree, that they dispatched the two Americans with their sabres before Lieutenant-colonel Tarleton could interpose, or any information be obtained respecting Colonel Sumpter.*³⁸

Tarleton later learned from American prisoners that Sumter “had demanded the cause of the two shots, and that an officer just returned from the advanced sentries had reported that the militia were firing at cattle.”³⁹

SUMTER'S SURPRISE

A little farther on, Tarleton saw Sumter's camp come into view:

*A serjeant and four men of the British legion soon afterwards approached the summit of the neighbouring eminence, where instantly halting, they crouched upon their horses, and made a signal to their commanding officer. Tarleton rode forwards to the advanced guard, and plainly discovered over the crest of the hill the front of the American camp, perfectly quiet, and not the least alarmed by the fire of the vedettes.*⁴⁰

Tarleton's men formed and charged, overcoming the Americans before many could get into a defensive position.

*The cavalry and infantry were formed into one line, and, giving a general shout, advanced to the charge. The arms and artillery of the continentals were secured before the men could be assembled. Universal consternation immediately ensued throughout the camp; some opposition was, however, made from behind the waggons, in front of the militia. The numbers, and extensive encampment of the enemy, occasioned several conflicts before the action was decided.*⁴¹

Samuel Martin stated that “as soon as the alarm of the attack reached Genl. Sumter—he sprang to his horse and cut loose with his knife the rope, by which he was tied, mounted him, and made great exertions to prevent his men from giving way—But the attack was so sudden and many of the men being drunk, he could not succeed in making a successful resistance.” James Potter Collins wrote that “before Sumpter could wake up his men and form, the enemy were among them cutting down

³⁷ Hardy Lassiter S4514 <https://revwarapps.org/s4514.pdf>. Col. Richard Winn, who was not present, stated that the defeat was “Owing to the inattention of his patrols and Rear Guard Commanded by Majr. Crofford.” Major Crofford (or Crawford) is unidentified. Richard Winn's Notes—1780 SCX2 <https://revwarapps.org/scx2.pdf>.

³⁸ Tarleton, *History*, 117. According to Collins, *Autobiography*, 42, however, at least some of the vedettes got away: “All at once the picket guns gave the alarm—they retreated on the main body with the enemy at their heels.”

³⁹ Tarleton, *History*, 119.

⁴⁰ Tarleton, *History*, 117.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

everything in their way.... It was a perfect rout and an indiscriminate slaughter. No quarter was given.”⁴² A British soldier wrote in a letter:

*A few of the rebels made a stand, but the greater part of them fled to the woods and hid themselves among the brambles. The “plunder” we have taken is almost all Squire Sumpter had, and as we have the warbrobe [sic] of the army, it is probable the black flies and jiggers are before this time troubling the epidermis of the rebel crew. The worst we wish them is that they may not be able to scratch.*⁴³

“At length,” Tarleton wrote, “the release of the regulars and the loyal militia, who were confined in the rear of the Americans, enabled Lieutenant-colonel Tarleton to stop the slaughter, and place guards over the prisoners.... Colonel Sumpter, who had taken off part of his clothes on account of the heat of the weather, in that situation, amidst the general confusion, made his escape.” According to David McCance, “Sumter made his escape from his tent half dressed—by running & jumping twenty feet down the Bank into Fishing Creek.”⁴⁴

James Potter Collins and some others returned later to the site of carnage. “The dead and wounded lay scattered in every direction over the field; numbers lay stretched cold and lifeless; some were yet struggling in the agonies of death, while here and there, lay others, faint with the loss of blood, almost famished for water, and begging for assistance.”⁴⁵ Among them was David Jackson “left for dead upon the field of battle having his scull [skull] fractured and losing thereby the use of his arm.”⁴⁶ Charles Miller was “Chopped in the head and shoulder & trod down & left for dead, that his Scull was Cut & fractured in such a manner that the membrane that covered his Brain might easily be seen that your petitioner does yet very sensibly feel the Effects of the wounds”⁴⁷ Americans taken as prisoners were only slightly more fortunate. William Hamilton “was taken to Charleston put in a prison ship and remained a prisoner near a year where he suffered the most extreme hardships.”⁴⁸

By Tarleton’s count,

*One hundred and fifty of [Sumter’s] officers and soldiers were killed and wounded; ten continental officers and one hundred men, many militia officers, and upwards of two hundred privates, were made prisoners; two three pounders, two ammunition waggons, one thousand stand of arms, forty-four carriages, loaded with baggage, rum, and other stores, fell into the possession of the British.*⁴⁹

⁴² Samuel Martin S2727 <https://revwarapps.org/s2727.pdf>. Collins, *Autobiography*, 42.

⁴³ Seth Wingard quoted in Frank Moore, *Diary of the American Revolution*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner, 1855), 321, note 1.

⁴⁴ Tarleton, *History*, 117-118. David McCance S16464 <https://revwarapps.org/s16464.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Collins, *Autobiography*, 43.

⁴⁶ David Jackson SC3361

<https://revwarapps.org/sc3361.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Charles Miller SC1975

<https://revwarapps.org/sc1975.pdf>.

⁴⁸ William Hamilton SC785

<https://revwarapps.org/sc785.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Tarleton, *History*, 118-119. The official return shows a total of 247 American prisoners. Piecuch, “British Casualty Reports.” 10.

Tarleton's losses were slight: "Captain Charles Campbell, who commanded the light infantry, was unfortunately killed near the end of the affair." One sergeant and seven privates were killed, and six privates were wounded.⁵⁰

EPILOGUE

Sumter escaped safely, but having lost half his men as killed, wounded and captured, one could have expected that he was finished as a military commander. Quite the opposite happened. General Richard Caswell of North Carolina put a thousand of his militiamen under Sumter's command, and Gen. Gates directed him to continue harassing the enemy west of the Wateree River.⁵¹ In October, Sumter was formally commissioned as Brigadier General in command of all South Carolina militias. In early November, Sumter marched about 400 men in the direction of the vital British post of Ninety Six. Sumter knew this would force Cornwallis to divert some of his troops to attack him, but he was again surprised in the early hours of November 9 at Fishdam Ford on Broad River by part of Tarleton's British Legion and other troops under Maj. James Wemyss.⁵² Sumter again narrowly escaped, and his troops gained a victory. Sumter continued his march toward Ninety Six, and this time Cornwallis sent Tarleton personally to intercept him. At Blackstock's Plantation on November 20, Sumter made a stand and gave Tarleton his first defeat, although Sumter suffered a severe gunshot wound to the right shoulder.⁵³

While Sumter was attempting to recover near Charlotte in January 1781, Gen. Nathanael Greene, Gates's replacement as commander of the southern army, prevailed on Sumter to help him reclaim South Carolina. Sumter undertook two ambitious expeditions that severely disrupted British operations in South Carolina: the Sumter's Rounds campaign of February and March 1781 and the Dog Days campaign in the following June and July.⁵⁴ Sumter's wound continued to trouble him, however, and in late July Greene reluctantly assigned him to light duties near Charlotte. Sumter's surprise at Fishing Creek was but a minor blemish in an illustrious career that deserves to be better known.

⁵⁰ Tarleton, *History*, 118. Piecuch, "British Casualty Reports," 9-10. Piecuch.pdf

⁵¹ Gov. Abner Nash to the Delegates of North Carolina, August 23, 1780, North Carolina State Papers, 1776-1788, Book No. 72, Page 97, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.php/document/csr15-0028>. General Gates to the President of Congress, August 30, 1780 in Tarleton, *History*, 154-155.

⁵² C. Leon Harris and Charles B. Baxley, "General Thomas Sumter's Surprise at Fishdam Ford" *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* (August 11, 2024), <https://southern-campaigns.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SCAR-Fishdam-Ford.pdf>.

⁵³ C. Leon Harris, "Blackstock's Plantation, November 20, 1780: A Revolutionary War Battlefield in the South Carolina Backcountry" (Academia.edu, 2017), [www.academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/s/cee02c31f4/blackstocks-plantation-november-20-1780-a-revolutionary-war-battlefield-in-the-south-carolina-backcountry?source=link). <https://www.academia.edu/s/cee02c31f4/blackstocks-plantation-november-20-1780-a-revolutionary-war-battlefield-in-the-south-carolina-backcountry?source=link>.

⁵⁴ C. Leon Harris and Charles B. Baxley, "'To Keep Up the Spirits of the People; C. Leon Harris and Charles B. Baxley, "Thunder Even at the Gates of Charlestown: Thomas Sumter's Raid of the Dog Days of 1781" *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* (August 9, 2024), <https://southern-campaigns.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SCAR-Dog-Days-paper.pdf>.

APPENDIX

Excerpt from a letter by Edward Boykin to Lyman C. Draper. (Capitalization corrected.)

Camden So.Ca/ Mch 13, 1874

Lym C. Draper/ Madison [Wisconsin]

Dear Sir

Your last was duly rec'd and now only waits to correct my information or substantiate it rather, before writing. I inclose you an original Letter of Col. Carey, signed in his military capacity as Col. of the Royal militia--addressed to one Joshua English which I got with some old papers last Summer. [not found] English to whom the letter is written was a Royalist but was keeping in with both parties as you perceive by the tenor of Carey's letter, but in reality acting on the English or rather British side.

Col. Carey was an Englishman and a man of education, character and position, a conscientious Royalist; he commanded the regiment of Royal militia raised here by Lord Cornwallis, and left with the British at the evacuation of Camden [May 9, 1781]. And returned to England. Some years after the war he returned to Camden to close up his business and was a guest of my great grand father John Adamson, and neither he or any of his representatives ever returned again.

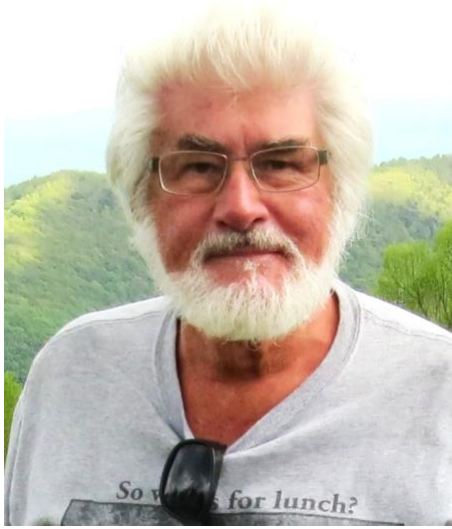
His "fort" was on the west side of the Wateree river about 900 yards from the Ferry on the Columbia road just at the Forks of the road running up the river to Winsboro. Commanding both roads. And a very defensible position, being on Shady[?; Sharp(?) written below] Hill, with a small creek covering its front, flank and rear. it was on the "Whitaker plantation," and their burying ground is just behind it. My informant was old Mr. Thos Whitaker now dead, who owned the place at the time of his death some 12 years ago. There is Carey's Hill on the East on Camden side of the river, just above high water mostly within the limits of the old Town where Col. Carey lived, and is sometimes confounded with the Fort but the facts are as I state them.

I can learn no particulars of its being taken by Genl Sumters, and do not remember anything of the kind. Should I learn anything will let you know....

[signed] Edw'd. Boykin⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Draper's Sumter Papers, 17VV238-241, kindly provided by Zach Lemhouse,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



C. Leon Harris's first research on a gamecock was 60 years ago as an undergraduate physics major at Virginia Tech under Dr. Paul B. Siegel of the Poultry Science Department, when he designed a transmitter and implanted it into the bird to record its heart rate and body temperature during a fight. After earning graduate 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. After retiring to Mount Pleasant SC and Adamant VT he was inspired by the late Charles B. Baxley to research the Revolutionary War in the South and has helped Will Graves transcribe more than thirty thousand Revolutionary War pension and bounty-land applications, rosters, and other documents at revwarapps.org.

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SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

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