

# *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution*



# The JOURNAL



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BONUS:  
"Danger" Is His  
Middle Name



A publication of  
 SOUTH CAROLINA  
AMERICAN  
REVOLUTION  
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INSIDE:  
Danger at the Breach

Doug MacIntyre



# The Journal

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# From the Editor

Hello All,

Recently, I took my 90-year-old mom on a trip to Fort Thicketty on the Liberty Trail in Cherokee County, South Carolina. This isn't far from our home in Spartanburg. The weather was perfect, and the bugs were not yet teeming in the backcountry. We had a pleasant walk around the property while I shared my knowledge of 18th-century events in the area. She listened attentively to my spouting off about this important Revolutionary War site. Eventually, we made our way to the fort itself.

While standing beside this ancient structure made of heart pine logs (shown on the right), several men walked down the pathway and paused to listen. I, being a ham, raised my voice so they could hear about the colonial settlers who built the fort for protection and formed the community of Greater Grindal Shoals. When I finished talking, they identified themselves as history teachers from the area. They took my contact information. Mom was, of course, impressed and proud.

The following Friday morning, I was having breakfast with a reenactor friend at a local diner when a gentleman at a nearby table asked if I was the same guy he had seen at Fort Thicketty. My head grew bigger as I claimed that honor.

He explained that he would like me to visit his classroom and tell his students about this important historical site. His students range from 7th to 11th grades. Not only was I humbled that a bona fide history teacher thought my information worthy of being taught, but he was also fascinated by this particular bit of history and wanted it shared. I was flattered.

What I learned from this experience is that one should never take for granted one's knowledge of the Revolutionary War and South Carolina, nor dismiss the power of history. As a regular speaker and teacher of 18th-century backcountry history, it is always nice to be appreciated. What is even better is when this information makes a real difference in others' lives.



*Richard C. Meehan, Jr.*

I am currently involved in a bold adventure to create a miniature museum dedicated to the Spartan Regiment of Militia, one of this state's earliest organized Patriot militia regiments (1775). This regiment was trained at Cedar Springs here in my hometown of Spartanburg. One of the thrusts of this effort is to provide a place where local schools can bring their students to learn about the ancestors who brought freedom to this country through painful sacrifice. As the new South Carolina license tag says, we are the state "Where the Revolutionary War Was Won." It is time, during our 250th Anniversary, to bring this important bit of history into our classrooms.

In liberty,  
Richard C. Meehan, Jr.  
Editor, **THE JOURNAL**

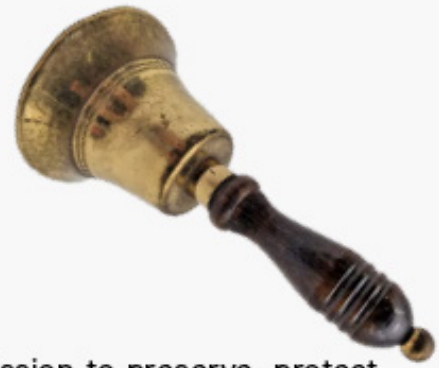
THE LIBERTY TRAIL—SOUTH CAROLINA

## Discover The Liberty Trail South Carolina

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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.

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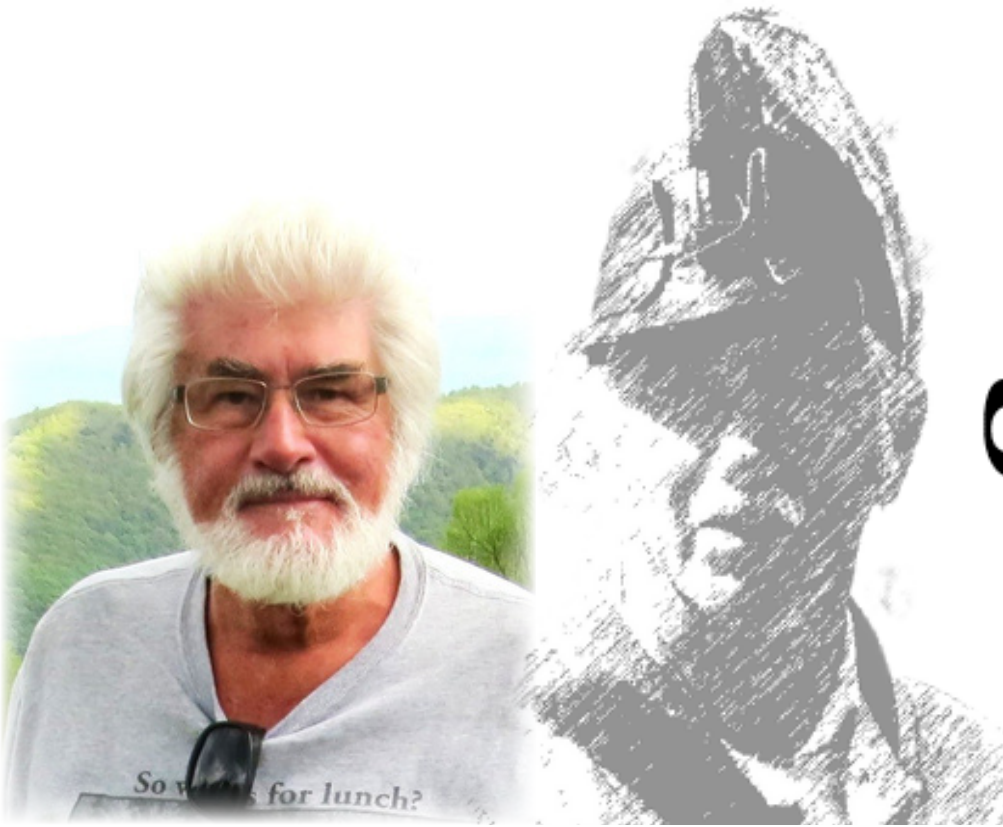


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# Dragon

# The

by  
**C. Leon Harris**

The recent pronouncement by the Secretary of Defense that the US would grant “no quarter, no mercy for our enemies” shows that there are still lessons to be learned from the Revolutionary War. Lt. Col. Henry Lee wrote that denying quarter to a surrendering enemy was “so contrary to the American character,” and it is now also illegal. The Battle of Waxhaws shows that it can also be self-defeating.

At Waxhaws in South Carolina on May 29, 1780, Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton’s Legion attacked a detachment of Virginia Continentals under Col. Abraham Buford. During the fighting Tarleton’s horse fell, and according to him, “a report amongst the cavalry, that they had lost their commanding officer... stimulated the soldiers to a vindictive asperity not easily restrained.” “Slaughter was commenced before Lieutenant-colonel Tarleton could remount another horse.” Out of Buford’s 350 men, 113 were slain, and many others were grievously wounded. Some survivors reported in pension applications that they received sword wounds to arms and hands, indicating that they had attempted to surrender after dropping the muskets with which they would otherwise have parried the sword blows. Many had both bayonet and sword wounds, showing that they were attacked by Tarleton’s infantry after being cut down by his cavalry.

Word that Buford’s men were attacked while

begging for quarter spread quickly among South Carolina Patriots. Many who had intended to remain peacefully at home took up arms against the British. A few days after Waxhaws, Thomas Sumter came out of retirement, and organized fellow refugees as a force that Cornwallis called the “greatest plague in this country.” There is no documentation that Sumter re-entered service because of Waxhaws, but the timing suggests that it was a factor. Waxhaws was certainly a cause for Captain John McClure and his three sons, who after hearing about it “arose upon their feet and made this united and solemn declaration, ‘that they would never submit nor surrender to the enemies of their country; that liberty or death from that time forth, should be their motto!’” Their resolve shows the absurdity of making enemies believe they have nothing to gain by surrendering and nothing to lose by fighting to the death.

Another lesson from Waxhaws is that not granting quarter encourages retaliation in kind. In February 1781, Lt. Col. Lee’s cavalry, urged on by shouts of “give them Buford’s play!” and “remember Buford!,” killed and wounded hundreds of Loyalists who had planned to join Cornwallis. The pivotal Battle of Guilford Courthouse might otherwise have been a decisive British victory instead of a costly stalemate. Denying quarter is a two-edged sword, and there is no telling which side will cut more deeply.



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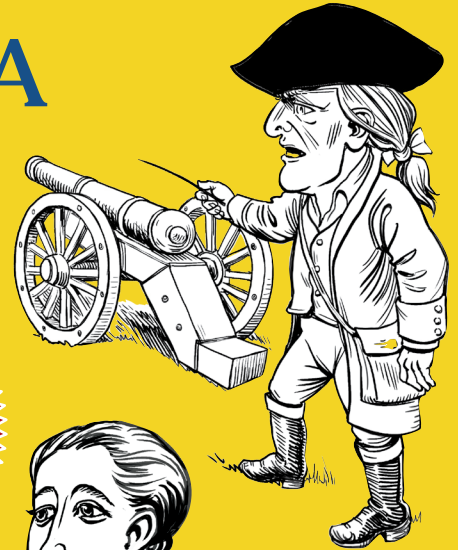
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# “Danger” Is His Middle Name

by

Richard C. Meehan, Jr.

Lieutenant Colonel William “Danger” Thomson was a leading South Carolina provincial and Continental officer whose military reputation included frontier service, backcountry counterinsurgency, and the denial of a British land crossing at the north end of Sullivan’s Island on June 28, 1776. His fellow Patriots remembered him as “Old Danger,” a moniker that appears in a Revolutionary War pension narrative directly linking the nickname to his command.<sup>1</sup> He was born in 1727, and his family migrated to South Carolina’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Southern Campaigns Revolutionary War Pension Applications & Rosters*. (n.d.). Revwarapps.org. <https://revwarapps.org/w5707.pdf>

Orangeburgh District.

By the 1750s, Thomson had established himself as a ranger officer, Indian trader, and community leader. In 1772, the Orangeburgh District appointed him its first sheriff under the colony's new reorganization into judicial districts. His 1755 marriage to Eugenia Russell linked him to influential local families. During the Cherokee War of 1759—1761, he earned a reputation as a capable commander. In 1775, he was elected lieutenant colonel commandant of a ranger regiment tasked with securing the interior. His leadership during the "Snow Campaign" helped suppress Loyalist resistance in the Ninety Six District, including the defeat of Patrick Cunningham's forces.<sup>2</sup>

He then served in a critical defensive role during the 1776 Charleston expedition, facing British troops attempting to cross Breach Inlet.<sup>3</sup> Stationed at the eastern end of Sullivan's Island, he commanded troops guarding the inlet. On June 28, British forces attempted to cross and outflank the American position. Thomson's men repulsed the attack, preventing a decisive British maneuver.<sup>4</sup> (*See Cover Story for details.*) Following the campaign, Thomson transitioned into Continental service and was promoted to colonel. He participated in operations in Georgia and South Carolina before resigning in 1778 due to health concerns and political responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> However, he returned to command the militia during the 1780 siege of Charleston. After the city's fall, he was captured and detained for several months at the "Old Exchange" before being released in June 1781. He then advised General Nathanael Greene on military actions during the Southern Campaign.<sup>6</sup>

After the war, the colonel remained a prominent political figure into the 1790s.<sup>7</sup> He served in the South Carolina Senate and played a role in local governance in the Orangeburgh District.<sup>8</sup> He was a delegate to the 1788 South Carolina convention that ratified the U.S. Constitution and again to the 1790 South Carolina constitutional convention in Columbia. Thomson made an unsuccessful bid for Congress in a 1795 special election, losing to Wade Hampton, and failed to secure re-election to the state senate in 1796.

War veteran John Ritchie referred to Thomson as "Old Danger" in his pension statement, noting that he joined a company under "Col. Thompson's [sic, William Thomson's] Regiment" and that "Col. Thomson bore



Image retrieved from Gibbesmuseum.org, 2026.  
<https://www.gibbesmuseum.org/uploads/images/col-lection/001/1920.01.03.jpg>.

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2 Salley, A. S. "Col. Moses Thomson and Some of His Descendants." *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 3, no. 2 (1902): 97–113. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27574986>.

3 Ibid, see also Robert M. Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 329-331.

4 Lee, Henry. *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1812), 62-73.

5 Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served in the American Army During the Revolutionary War, National Archives, Record Group 93.

6 Papers of General Nathanael Greene, Vol. 8, ed. Dennis M. Conrad (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

7 Salley, A. S.

8 Journal of the Senate of South Carolina, 1778–1790, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

the nickname of ‘Old Danger.’”<sup>9</sup> Based on Thomson’s service record, the nickname certainly matched his bold leadership style.

Colonel William “Danger” Thomson died in Sweet Springs, Virginia, on November 22, 1796, at age sixty-nine.<sup>10</sup> In the eighteenth century, honor was often shown through enduring values such as trust, reputation, and public gratitude rather than medals or ribbons.<sup>11</sup> Thomson was highly honored by these standards. His early role as a ranger commander earned tangible recognition from the colonial assembly, and his leadership during the 1776 defense of South Carolina drew formal praise from the Continental Congress—thereby establishing his reputation as a key supporter of American liberty.<sup>12</sup> Thomson’s legacy is that of a generation of leaders who linked militia experience to formal governance and combined frontier skills with nation-building. His men, calling him “Old Danger,” saw him as embodying the daring, resolute spirit that defined America’s fight for independence.<sup>13</sup> Today, his story encourages us to see the broader truth about the mindset of our founding Patriots: lives committed to community, country, and cause—one that helped secure the freedoms we still cherish and uphold.<sup>14</sup>



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9 Southern Campaigns Revolutionary War Pension Applications & Rosters. (n.d.). Revwarapps.org. <https://revwarapps.org/w5707.pdf>

10 Salley, A. S. “Col. Moses Thomson and Some of His Descendants.” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 3, no. 2 (1902): 97–113. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27574986>.

11 (2017). *Early American Honor Culture and the United States Congress*. Yale University Press. <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2017/06/20/early-american-honor-culture-and-the-united-states-congress/>

12 *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906), 598–599 (July 20, 1776).

13 (n.d.). Colonel William Thomson. <https://www.gibbesmuseum.org/miniatures/collection/detail/DE0B0B3D-E139-4E7B-88E1-577599753390>

14 (n.d.). *Revolutionary War History - Upcountry South Carolina*. Upcountry South Carolina. <https://upcountrysc.com/explore/revolutionary-war-history/>

# L O Y A L I S T

# THE



by  
Paul Wood



In 1769, at age 25, Patrick Cunningham (1743-1796) helped his older brother, Robert, lead a wagon train of Cunninghams from Augusta County in western Virginia to South Carolina's Ninety Six District. They received land grants on the north side of the Saluda River, in present-day Laurens County. In order of importance, here are seven ways Patrick influenced the history of his adopted state and the new nation whose birth he opposed.

**7**Our ranking begins with Patrick's military service. Following the First Siege of Ninety Six in November 1775, Captain Cunningham and about 500 Tories were defeated at the Great Cane Brake. (See below.) After serving time in Charleston, he returned home and avoided conflict with Patriots. With the British arrival in Charleston in May 1780, he was promoted to colonel. He was given command of the Little River Regiment (today's Laurens County), with two dozen officers and about 150 men of lower rank. Despite his command and the size of his regiment, Patrick, like his brother Robert, failed to distinguish himself during the war. He and those serving under Major Patrick Ferguson suffered a monumental defeat at Kings Mountain in October 1780. The Patriots captured him, but he was soon released. On December 12, he and his regiment played a minor role in the British victory at Long Canes.

On December 30, Patrick served as second-in-command under Robert at Williams' Fort. Overnight, forty Patriots led by Col. Joseph Hayes pursued the Tories who had escaped Col. William Washington's sabers at Hammond's Store. Robert and Patrick led a hasty retreat to Ninety Six but still lost several men when Hayes arrived at the fort at

dawn. On August 30, 1781, Francis Marion ambushed a combined force of British, Tories, and Hessians at Parker's Ferry. A "Captain Cunningham," possibly Patrick, was involved. At the close of 1782, banished from the state and with his property confiscated by the General Assembly, Patrick accepted transportation and established a new home in East Florida. In summary, despite his rank, Patrick's contributions to the war were limited.

**6** Next in significance is the respect Patrick earned soon after his arrival in South Carolina, where he had a positive impact on civic life. Only months after arriving in the Ninety Six District, he was named Deputy Surveyor for the Province. In 1773, he became Magistrate of the Ninety Six District. Before the war, Patrick also started Rosemont Plantation, which overlooked the Saluda River. Today, it is Lake Greenwood.

**5** Along with his three brothers, Patrick announced his loyalty to the Crown in 1775. On November 3, he stole a shipment of ammunition that the Council of Safety had intended as a peace offering to the Cherokee of the Lower Settlements. Only weeks later, Patrick participated in South Carolina's first bloodshed of the Revolutionary War, the First Siege at Ninety Six. Major Joseph Robinson and Captain Cunningham led the hasty construction of a fort, followed by a three-day siege. Though a signatory to the truce that ended the conflict, Patrick immediately broke the treaty and gathered an army of five hundred Tories.

**4** A month later, on December 22, 1775, Patrick commanded the Tory forces, who were readily defeated in a stand of tall cane along the Reedy River at the Battle of the Great Cane Brake. The militia volunteers of Col. Richard Richardson's Snow Campaign also recovered the stolen ammunition. Patrick escaped deeper into Indian Territory, but in February he was captured and jailed in Charleston alongside his brother Robert and about 130 other Tories.

**3** In 1783, during his exile in East Florida, he petitioned the South Carolina General Assembly to reverse its decision and allow him to return home. He was amerced (taxed at twelve percent) and permitted to return to Rosemont. There, he and his wife, Ann Harris, built an impressive mansion surrounded by beautifully landscaped gardens. Their gardens were considered among the most outstanding in the South.

**2** Before the war began, Patrick began purchasing enslaved people and putting them to work in fields of indigo, tobacco, cotton, and a variety of grains. It is impossible to measure the enormous impact that an enslaver's personality, temperament, and objectives had on the lives of the men, women, and children he owned. But three decades of census data reveal that the enslaved people and shrewd land purchases enabled Patrick and his son, Robert (named for Patrick's brother), to become the wealthiest residents of Laurens County. Wealth was measured by the acreage owned (over 10,000 acres), the value of their harvests, and the number of enslaved people they possessed.

**1** The foremost contribution Patrick made to American history began with his son Robert's 1814 marriage to Louisa Dalton Bird. In 1816, Louisa gave birth to Ann Pamela Cunningham. Though Ann Pamela was permanently maimed in her teens after a horse fall, she saved George and Martha Washington's home, Mount Vernon, from ruin by founding and presiding over America's first historical preservation society. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association successfully purchased the Washington estate, restored it from severe disrepair, protected it during the Civil War, and opened it to the public. To this day, the Association continues to maintain and enhance the historic home, grounds, and outbuildings.

The reader might notice that Patrick's influence on South Carolina's and America's history grew over the years. His foremost achievement was to give our nation his remarkable granddaughter, Ann Pamela. Coming soon: a column about Ann Pamela.

# GET INVOLVED

South Carolina's Revolutionary War story isn't a single tale or event. It's thousands. Discover where ordinary people proved extraordinary, and experience Revolutionary South Carolina for yourself. There are so many ways to be a part of the 250th anniversary of The American Revolution in South Carolina.



## GET LOCAL

Explore what happened and what's happening in your county!



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More battles, skirmishes and events happened in South Carolina than anywhere else in



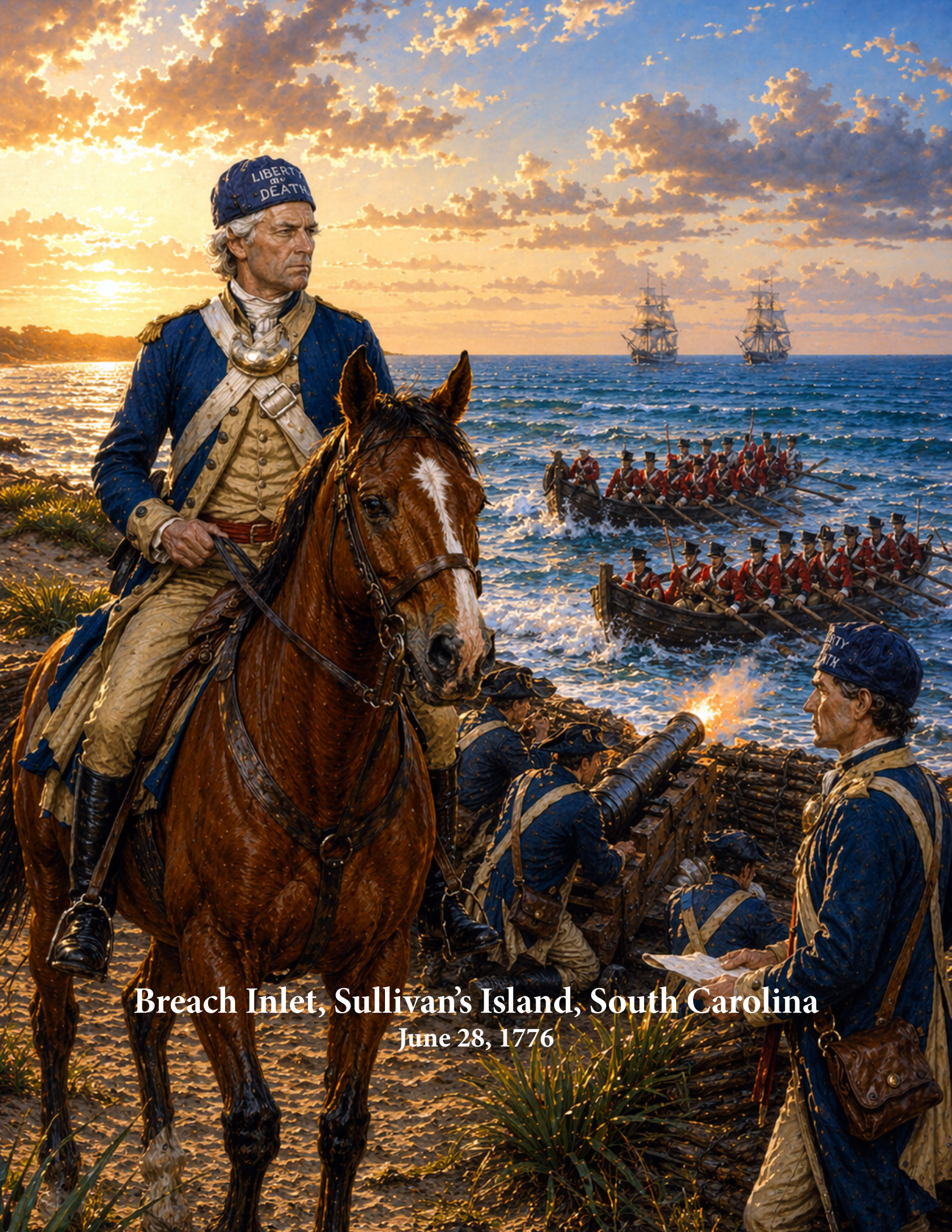
## READ THE BLOG

Their stories are our stories! Learn more about the people, places, events and untold stories



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**Breach Inlet, Sullivan's Island, South Carolina**  
June 28, 1776

# DANGER at the BREACH

by

Doug MacIntyre

American Patriots won an astonishing victory at Charleston, South Carolina, on June 28, 1776, six days before the Declaration of Independence. The Battle of Sullivan's Island was a major battle involving more than 12,000 British and American soldiers, sailors, and support personnel.<sup>1</sup> This first defeat of a joint attack by the British army and navy was one of the Patriots' most decisive victories of the entire war. A little-known part of the battle is reconstructed here to reveal how overmatched Americans blocked the British army and made the victory possible.<sup>2</sup>

The Patriots had taken over the government of South Carolina and its wealthy capital, Charleston, in 1775. In early June 1776, thousands of people in America's fourth-largest city witnessed a terrifying spectacle when an intimidating British force arrived offshore in nearly sixty ships to begin restoring Crown rule.<sup>3</sup> The expedition included a Royal Navy squadron with twelve armed ships of war commanded by Commodore Sir Peter Parker and a British army commanded by Major General Henry Clinton. Parker and Clinton sought a quick victory to show support for Loyalists and reestablish the Crown's presence in the South before joining the British campaign to capture New York and isolate New England. They planned to secure Sullivan's Island at the entrance to the busy harbor and leave two warships with a garrison of soldiers on the island to control the seaport until the British could return to reclaim all of Charleston and South Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Commodore Parker and General Clinton developed a two-pronged strategy to capture Sullivan's Island by land and sea: the navy would bombard an unfinished fort of palmetto logs and sand, and the army would assault the fort's vulnerable rear.

Responding to the threat posed by the British expedition, the Continental Congress appointed America's most experienced senior military officer to command the Southern Department. Major General Charles Lee was a brash, temperamental, and demanding soldier of fortune who arrived at the same time as the British force and feverishly set about improving Charleston's defenses. Not knowing that the enemy's objective was limited to Sullivan's Island, he and the local Patriot leaders positioned thousands of troops in and around the city, with two of South Carolina's most experienced officers at the points of the attack on Sullivan's Island. Colonel William Moultrie of the 2nd Regiment commanded the fort, and Lieutenant Colonel William Thomson of the 3rd Regiment (Rangers) commanded troops guarding the island's shoreline.

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<sup>1</sup> 6,522 Americans per John Drayton, LLD, *Memoirs of the American Revolution: From Its Commencement to the Year 1776, Inclusive*, vol. II (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1821), 282; 3,000 British troops per John Campbell, *Plan of the scene of action at Charleston in the province of South Carolina the 28th June 1776* (Ann Arbor: William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan), and approximately 2,800 British sailors per a compilation of British naval resources at <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> This is an expanded version of an article first published in *Journal of the American Revolution*, [allthingsliberty.com/2023/05/danger-at-the-beach](https://allthingsliberty.com/2023/05/danger-at-the-beach).

<sup>3</sup> Fifty-nine ships are identified at <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>. Other British ships may have been present. Three of the 12 warships were stationed near Long Island under control of General Clinton.

<sup>4</sup> Narrative of Major General Henry Clinton in William James Morgan, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 5, *American Theatre: May 9, 1776 - Jul. 31, 1776* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 325-327; Commodore Sir Peter Parker to Major General Henry Clinton, June 2, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 351; Major General Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain, July 8, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 982.

The Patriot soldiers on Sullivan's Island depended on each other. If Thomson's troops failed to stop the British, Moultrie's fort would likely fall to land and sea attacks. If the fort couldn't withstand the Royal Navy, the Patriots would be caught between the British Army and Navy. Losing Sullivan's Island and some of the colonies' best soldiers would threaten the rebellion in Charleston and South Carolina, risking serious consequences for the American Revolution. Luckily, the British land and sea attacks failed.

## Victory in View

Anxious eyewitnesses in the city were awestruck on June 28, 1776, as they watched Colonel Moultrie and his men heroically defend the fort on the horizon against a ferocious, day-long bombardment by the British warships. The fort's thick walls of palmetto logs and sand stood firm while the Americans returned fire slowly and deliberately to conserve their precious supply of powder and ammunition. Their well-directed cannon fire killed or wounded more than 200 British sailors and inflicted debilitating damage to the warships, with modest American losses.<sup>5</sup> The valiant victory at the fort was extolled throughout the colonies and became the historical focal point of the Battle of Sullivan's Island. It is commemorated today by the National Park Service at the iconic site later named Fort Moultrie.

## Forgotten Fight

As the Patriots in the fort repelled the assault by sea, Colonel Thomson and a diverse band of Patriots repelled the British army's attempt to assault the fort by land. They kept the British off Sullivan's Island by blocking their crossing of an Atlantic Ocean inlet that separated Thomson's force of 780 from Clinton's army of three thousand. Thomson and his men were recognized for the victory and thanked by the Continental Congress.<sup>6</sup> However, their contribution was nearly lost in history, like countless other remote battles of the revolution. The long, intricate battle of maneuvers and skirmishes was fought out of sight in the wilderness and lacked the captivating drama of

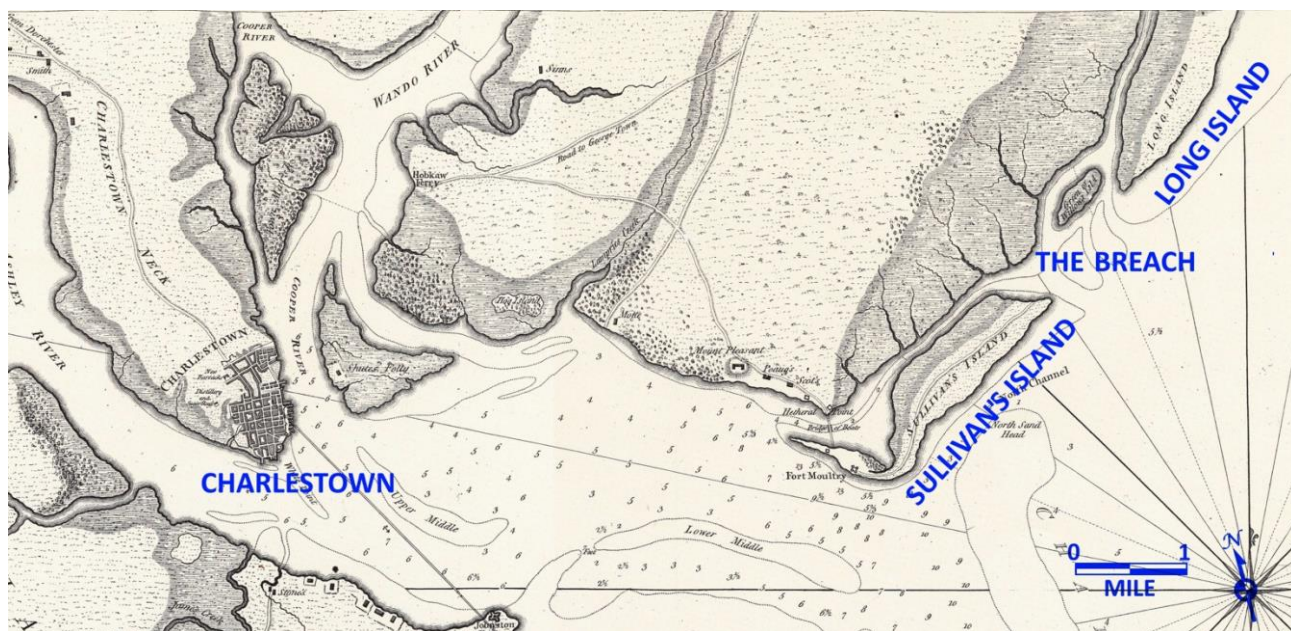


Figure 1. A section of "A Plan of the Town, Bar, Harbour and Environs, of Charleston in South Carolina" by William Faden, 1780. This map shows the city of Charleston, Sullivan's Island at the harbor entrance, remote Long Island, and the Breach between the two islands.

<sup>5</sup>Account of the Attack made upon Sullivan's Island by William Chambers, in Morgan, Naval Documents, 804; Commodore Sir Peter Parker to Philip Stephens, July 9, 1776, in Morgan, Naval Documents, 1001; William Moultrie, Memoirs of the American Revolution, vol.1 (New York: David Longworth, 1802), 177.

<sup>6</sup>Journal of the Continental Congress, July 20, 1776, in American Archives 1837-1853 (Washington, DC: M. St Clair Clarke and Peter Force), 1585.

the fight at the fort. Few details were published, and the crucial victory eventually faded into obscurity. Through sources not readily available to early historians, we have learned how Colonel Thomson and his outnumbered, outgunned band maneuvered to the verge of victory *before* June 28 and thwarted the land attack on that fateful Friday.

The British target, Sullivan's Island, was a three-mile-long link in a chain of wild, sandy barrier islands separated from the mainland by marshes and creeks and separated from one another by ocean inlets.<sup>7</sup> The next link up the coast stretched eight miles to the northeast and was aptly named Long Island (now Isle of Palms). The inlet between Sullivan's Island and Long Island, known as "the Breach" (now Breach Inlet), was a tidal flat about a mile and a half wide, laced with muddy bogs and sandbars that were exposed at low tide and gradually covered by surging ocean water as the tide rose twice per day. Constantly changing, shallow streams meandered among the sandbars and tidal pools, and a channel seven feet deep ran along the northern shore of Sullivan's Island.

A unit of two hundred ten rangers was defending the Sullivan's Island shoreline when the British expedition anchored offshore, and General Clinton scouted for ways to get his army onto the island to assault the fort.<sup>8</sup> Clinton and Parker initially planned a sudden attack, but the general did not want to land directly on Sullivan's Island through rough surf under fire. Before verifying reports that the inlet separating Long Island from Sullivan's Island was passable on foot at low water, he chose to stage his army on unoccupied Long Island and have the troops wade across the Breach to attack Sullivan's Island on foot.<sup>9</sup>

## British Force

Clinton and his two generals, Major General Charles, Earl Cornwallis, and Brigadier General John Vaughan, made unopposed landings in the middle of June at the northeast end of Long Island with virtually all their regular troops, Loyalists, and support personnel.<sup>10</sup> The army of 3,000 included the 15<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 37<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, 54<sup>th</sup>, 57<sup>th</sup>, and 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiments of Foot; grenadiers and light infantry companies of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> Regiments; a group of Marines; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Royal Highland Emigrants; and the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Artillery with cannon, howitzers, and mortars.<sup>11</sup> The army also had control of floating batteries, pilot boats, small armed craft, and three warships armed with at least twenty-two cannon. Schooners *Lady William* and *Saint Lawrence* were stationed in the creek flanking Long Island, and sloop *Ranger* was based in Spence's Inlet at the northeast tip of Long Island.<sup>12</sup>

## American Force

The Patriots facing the British army across the Breach were known as the "advance guard." Their leader was a respected citizen-soldier from the South Carolina backcountry known by the sobriquet "Danger" for his bravery

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<sup>7</sup> Edward McCrady, LLD, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution 1775–1780* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1902), 135-36; William Faden, "A plan of the attack of Fort Sullivan, Map. London: Wm. Faden, 1776. *Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center*; John Campbell, *Plan of the scene*; John Campbell, *Charleston and the British attack of June 1776* (Ann Arbor: William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan). The Faden map is Figure 4; the Campbell maps were General Clinton's battle maps.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Wise to Henry William Harrington, June 7, 1776, in Alexander Gregg, *History of the Old Cheraws* (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1905), 268.

<sup>9</sup> William B. Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 30-31; Lieut.-General Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain, July 8, 1776, in K. G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783*, vol. XII (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, Ltd., 1976), 163.

<sup>10</sup> Clinton Narrative, June 7 to 16, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 573.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Beatson, LLD, *Naval and Military Memoirs of Great Britain from 1727 to 1783*, vol. 6 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1804), 45; Chambers Account in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 804.

<sup>12</sup> Parker to Stephens, July 9, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 998. The creek is now known as Hamlin Creek and Spence's Inlet is now known as Dewees Inlet.

and daring in battle.<sup>13</sup> Lt. Col. William Thomson had outfitted his 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment with distinctive caps proclaiming “Liberty or Death,”<sup>14</sup> a motto befitting the Battle of Sullivan’s Island.

As the imposing British force was landing on Long Island, he assumed personal command of the advance guard and immediately requested reinforcements to offset his disadvantage in manpower and firepower. Patriot units were moved frantically between the mainland and Sullivan’s Island until the advance guard totaled 780 soldiers. The diverse group included Thomson’s South Carolina 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment rangers, South Carolina state troops, North Carolina regulars, a small detachment of militia, a few artillerymen from the 4th Regiment of South Carolina, and the Raccoon or Foot Rover company, which included approximately thirty warriors from the Catawba and associated Native American tribes.<sup>15</sup>

Thomson and some of his 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment officers and men had combat experience, but most others were raw recruits hastily assembled to defend Charleston. Their firepower was augmented with an 18-pound cannon and one or two 6-pound cannon in palmetto log fortifications overlooking the Breach between Long Island and Sullivan’s Island.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 2. Depiction of Lieutenant Colonel William “Danger” Thomson 1727-1796 as seen at Thomson Park on Sullivan’s Island, SC, <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>.



Figure 3. An illustration showing American and British soldiers on the sands, salt marshes, and islands surrounding the Breach. <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Doug MacIntyre, “A Man Called Danger,” *The Mercury Newsletter* (June 16, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Scoggins, “Here Come the Liberty Caps!” *A History of the Third South Carolina Regiment* (York, SC: Culture & Heritage Museums, 2006, 2007, and 2008), 2-3; Morgan Brown, “Reminiscences of the Revolution,” *Russell’s Magazine*, vol. 6, October-March 1860 (Charleston, SC: Walker, Evans & Co), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 142; Drayton, *Memoirs*, 288-289; McCrady, *History in the Revolution*, 145. The Catawba tribe allied with the South Carolina Patriots, who often used the term “Catawba” for any indigenous warriors who fought by their side.

<sup>16</sup> Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 142; Joseph Johnson, MD, *Traditions and Reminiscences, Chiefly of the American Revolution in the South* (Charleston, South Carolina: Walker and James, 1851), 94.

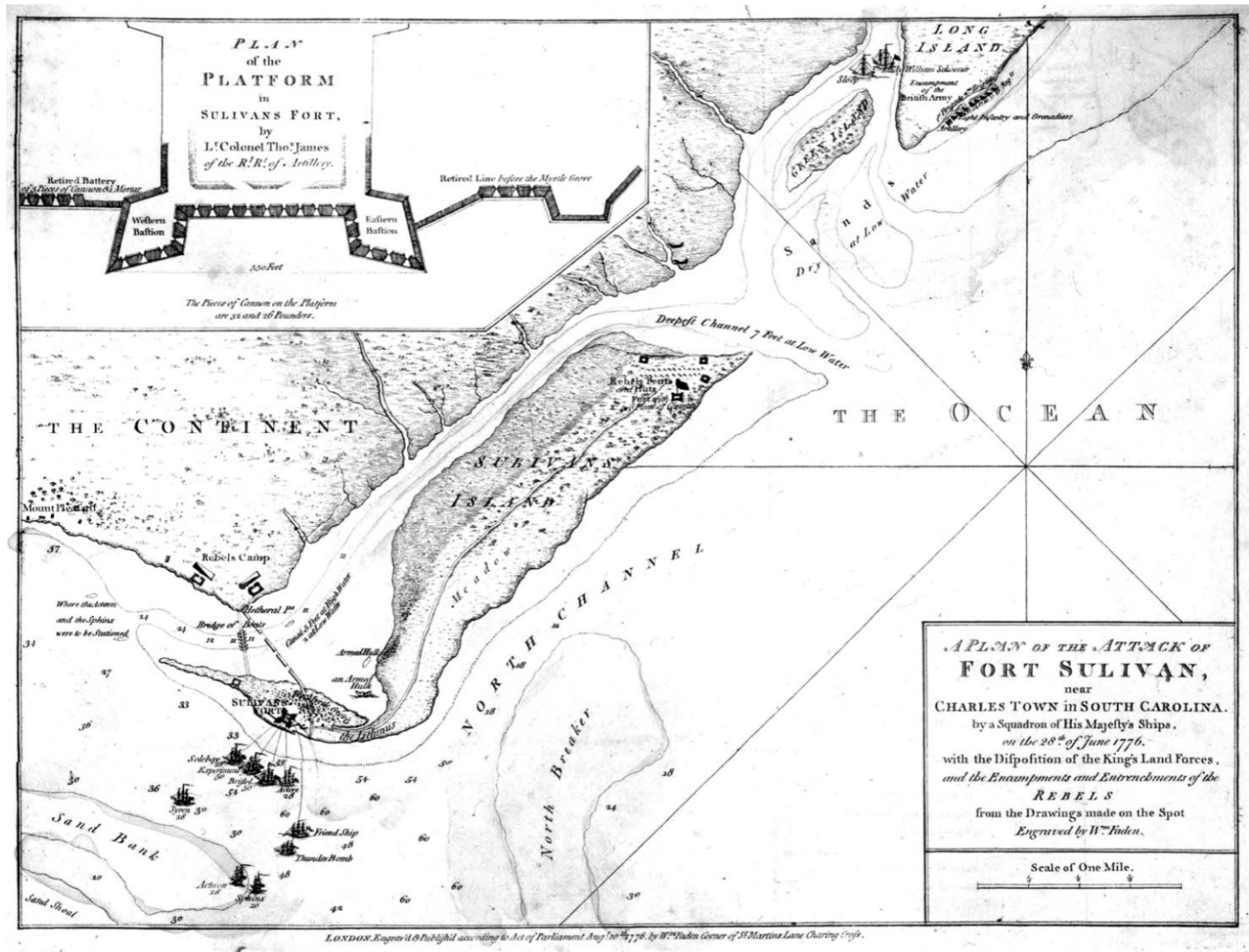


Figure 4. Faden, William. "A plan of the attack of Fort Sullivan, Map. London: Wm. Faden, 1776. Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center. The inset in the upper left shows the front of Fort Sullivan, by Lt. Col. Thomas James.

## Monumental Mistake

After transferring his force from the ships to the northeast end of Long Island, Clinton and his officers spent nights "fording and reconnoitering those infernal bogs and creeks that lay contiguous to Sullivan's Island." He realized his false assumption about the depth of water in the Breach on June 18 and later wrote, "To our unspeakable mortification and disappointment, we discovered that the passage across the channel which separates the two islands was nowhere shallower at low water than seven feet instead of eighteen inches, which was the depth reported."<sup>17</sup> This deep channel made wading across the inlet impossible. The general should have investigated before committing his army to Long Island, and now he was in a self-inflicted predicament.

From his camp on Long Island, Major General Clinton sent Brigadier General Vaughan to the navy anchorage to tell Commodore Parker that the army could not ford the inlet to attack the fort as initially planned.<sup>18</sup> The British Secretary of State for the American Colonies had directed Clinton to avoid great loss and immediately proceed to

<sup>17</sup> Willcox, *American Rebellion*, 1:30-31, 374-75.

<sup>18</sup> Clinton to Vaughan, June 18, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 609. The British army and navy commanders were based miles apart and communicated indirectly and often ineffectually through dispatches and intermediaries, partly because Clinton was prone to seasickness and declined to stay aboard Parker's flagship.

New York if the mission could accomplish nothing of consequence,<sup>19</sup> but no record has been found that he considered abandoning the joint attack. As overall commander of the expedition, Clinton evaluated several alternatives and settled on an amphibious assault across the Breach to support the naval attack on the fort.

## Amphibious Assault Tactics

Attacking with foot soldiers over water in the eighteenth century utilized special “flatboats” carried by the Royal Navy. These versatile boats, rowed by sailors, were well-suited to crossing the Breach. They were more than thirty feet long and floated in just two feet of water. Each flatboat could transport up to six tons of gear or fifty soldiers, and they could be outfitted with sails and swivel guns (small cannon). The British expedition had fifteen functioning flatboats, enough to land several hundred men in a wave before the sailors rowed back across the inlet for another wave.<sup>20</sup> The soldiers could not fire while tightly packed in the open boats, their muskets held upright. They would disembark by combat team as fast as possible to establish a beachhead while British artillery or warships disrupted the enemy defenses with suppressing fire.<sup>21</sup> Thomson’s troops on Sullivan’s Island were a mile and a half or more from the British artillery on Long Island – too far for effective suppressing fire. To support the amphibious crossing, Clinton needed to find high and dry ground closer to Sullivan’s Island for artillery batteries, or deep, wide channels within the Breach for warships.

## Adverse Conditions

While the opposing forces searched for advantageous positions in and around the Breach, more than 4,000 British and American people on the two islands endured miserable conditions. Summer on South Carolina’s sunbaked barrier islands was nearly unbearable for anyone, especially for those from cooler climates who had suffered grueling voyages, illnesses, and food shortages. A surgeon who sailed from England with the expedition wrote of the suffocating heat with “Not a breath of air stirring – thick cobwebs to push thro’ everywhere, knee deep in rotten wood and dried Leaves, every hundred yards a swamp with putrid standing water in the middle, full of small Alligators ... and no place intirely free from Rattle Snakes.”<sup>22</sup> A young British captain told his family about living “like beasts of the field” and “lying five nights in the midst of a putrid marsh up to the ankles in filth and water.”<sup>23</sup> A soldier encamped in the Long Island wilderness wrote to his brother, “We have lived upon nothing but salt Pork and Pease. We sleep upon the Sea Shore, nothing to shelter us from the rains but our coats and a miserable paltry blanket. There is nothing that grows upon the island, it being a mere sandbank, and a few bushes that harbour Millions of Musketoos, a greater plague than there can be in Hell itself ... The oldest of our officers do not remember, of ever undergoing such hardships, as we have done since our arrival here.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Clinton Narrative, April 18 to May 31, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 327.

<sup>20</sup> Capacity estimates varied from 400 to 700 per wave according to sources in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 608, 653, 782, and 783; Francis, Lord Rawdon to the Earl of Huntington, July 3, 1776, in *Hastings Family Papers* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library), mssHA, Box 99, HA 5116. Lord Rawdon, an officer on Clinton’s staff, estimated that the flatboats would need at least one-half hour to transport each wave of troops.

<sup>21</sup> Hugh T. Harrington, “Invading America: The Flatboats That Landed Thousands of British Troops on American Beaches,” *Journal of the American Revolution* (March 16, 2015): March 5, 2023, [allthingsliberty.com](http://allthingsliberty.com). Two months after the Battle of Sullivan’s Island, General Clinton successfully employed these tactics in the Battle of Long Island, New York, where the terrain and situation were favorable and the landing was unopposed.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson Forster, *Diary of Thompson Forster, Staff Surgeon to His Majesty’s Detached Hospital in North America, October 19th 1775 to October 23rd 1777*, June 16, 1776, 63.

<sup>23</sup> James Murray to Bessy, July 7, 1776, in Eric Robson, *Letters from America, 1773 to 1780* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1950) 29-30. Sir James Murray was an insightful young officer in the 57th Regiment who rose to the rank of general and became a member of Parliament and British Secretary at War.

<sup>24</sup> Will Falconer to Anthony Falconer, July 13, 1776, in *The South Carolina and American General Gazette*, August 2, 1776, in R. W. Gibbes, ed., *Documentary History of the American Revolution, 1776-1782* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1857), 19-21.

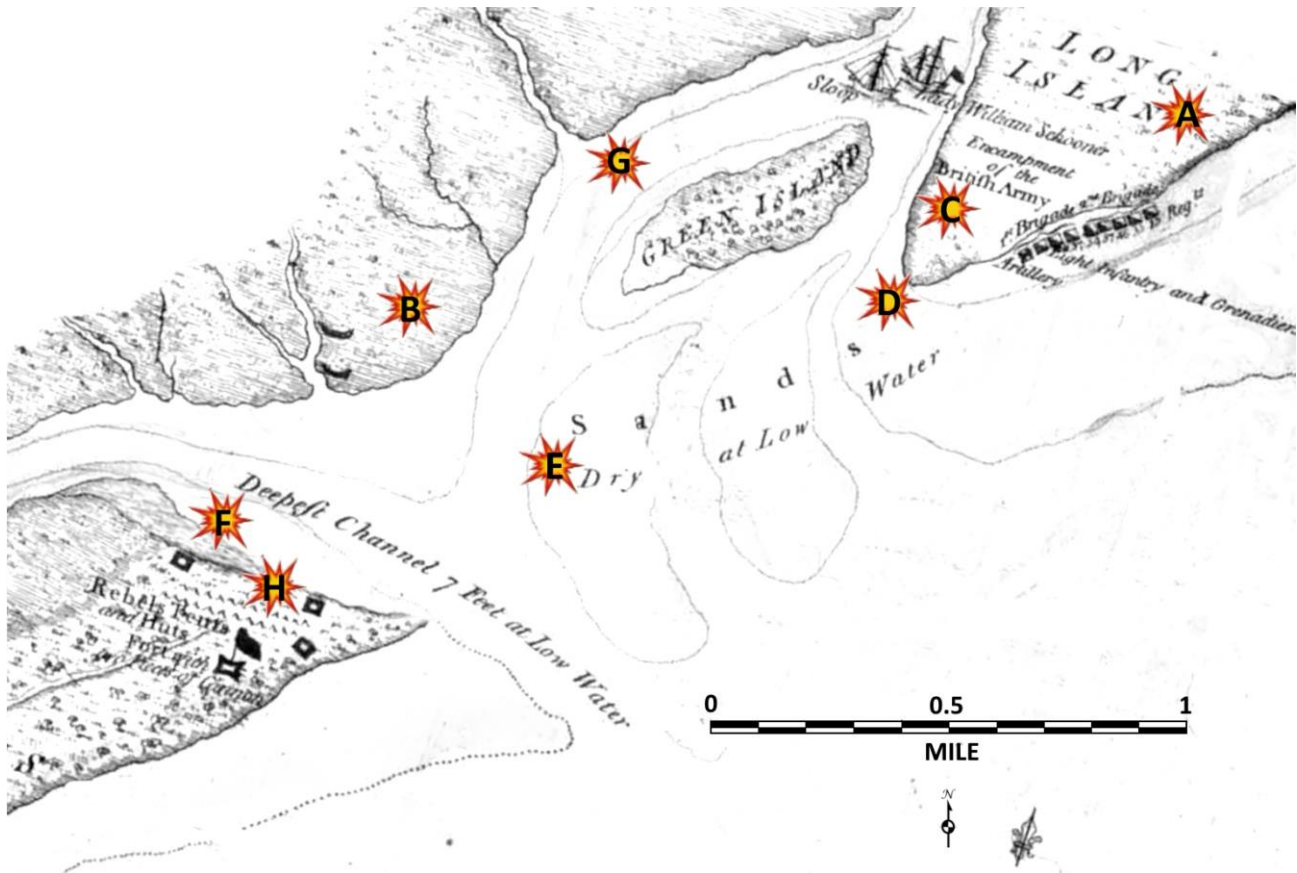


Figure 5. A section of the Figure 4 map annotated with approximate locations of fighting in and around the Breach June 18-27, 1776 based on first person accounts.

## Ten Days of Maneuvers and Skirmishes

Combat made discomfort a secondary concern. Early in the conflict, an American rifleman reconnoitering Long Island shot a member of a British scouting party. According to a Patriot, “He was dressed in red, faced with black, and had a cockade & feather in his hat and a sword by his side. By which it appears that he was an officer.”<sup>25</sup> This may have occurred in the general vicinity of image “A” on the Figure 5 map. The action escalated when most of the British army marched to the southwest end of Long Island and set up camp directly across the inlet in view of the Patriot advance guard. The opposing forces remained on duty day and night, as sentinels and patrols approached dangerously close to their enemies across the marshes and creeks on the west side of the Breach.<sup>26</sup> A British diary noted on June 20, “One of ours [a sentinel] was shot thro’ the leg last night, and Captain Trail shot one of their Officers thro’ the head this morning, I saw him fall immediately and [he] never stired afterwards.”<sup>27</sup> These close engagements were likely in the general area of high salt marsh and creeks indicated by “B” on the map. Inexperienced Patriots incurred the wrath of General Lee by firing ineffectively from extreme distances and passing over to Long Island without orders.<sup>28</sup> Seeking a reward for the first prisoner captured, three Patriots paddled to a British camp at night, failed to take a prisoner, and mistakenly shot a member of their own party (“C”). The British tracked the group back to the Breach, where the advance guard opened fire, igniting hours of

<sup>25</sup> Richard Hutson to Isaac Hayne, June 24, 1776, in Richard Hutson Letter Book 1765-1777 (Charleston, SC: The South Carolina Historical Society), 34/559. The red uniform with black facings suggests that the British officer was from the 4th Regiment.

<sup>26</sup> Wise to Harrington, June 27, 1776, in Gregg, Old Cheraws, 271.

<sup>27</sup> Forster, Diary, June 20, 1776, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Lee to William Thomson, June 21, 1776, in The Lee Papers, vol. 2, 1776-1778 (New York: Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1872), 76-77.

intense combat with casualties including a Patriot's severed hand ("D").<sup>29</sup> This action was so loud and long-lasting that Commodore Parker, anchored seven miles south, thought the main battle had begun at the Breach and ordered his ships to create a diversion.<sup>30</sup>

On another day, Loyalist Scots Highlanders shouted in Gaelic as they attacked Patriots on a sandbar ("E") and ambushed a group of the Catawba on the Sullivan's Island beach ("F"). They fired with impressive accuracy until they were dislodged by grape and other fire from American artillery.<sup>31</sup> Thomson's cannon fired on the armed schooner *Lady William*, an armed sloop (probably *Ranger*), and a pilot boat in the creek beside Long Island and Green Island, hitting the ships several times before they could retreat up the creek and out of range ("G").<sup>32</sup> When South Carolina President John Rutledge and General Lee were visiting Colonel Thomson, a British shell exploded nearby and the president took a piece of shrapnel to town as a souvenir ("H").<sup>33</sup> The frequent, long-distance exchanges of artillery and small-arms fire caused equipment damage and casualties while revealing the

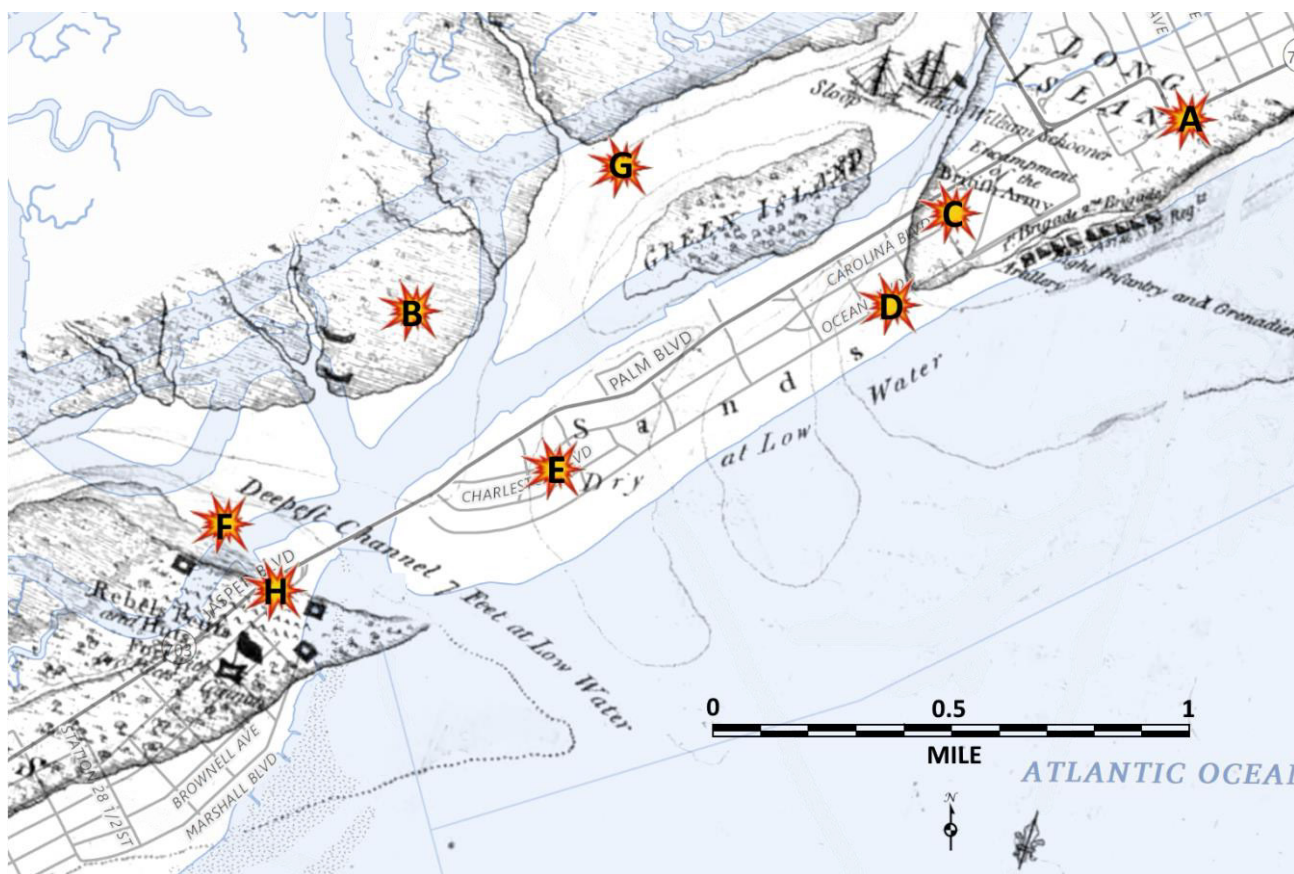


Figure 6. Approximate fighting locations on a modern U.S. Geological Survey map, courtesy of Leon Harris. Accreting sand filled the terrain and reduced the distance between Long Island (Isle of Palms) and Sullivan's Island from a mile and a half in 1776 to one-fourth of a mile in 2026. The southeast tip of Long Island in 1776 was in the vicinity of today's Isle of Palms commercial district, and land that was once inlet sandbars now supports Isle of Palms houses and businesses.

<sup>29</sup> Hutson to Hayne, June 24, 1776, in Hutson, Letter Book. A wound likely sustained in this engagement is mentioned in a pension application transcribed by William T. Graves, <https://revwarapps.org/w8668.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Commodore Peter Parker to Secretary of the Admiralty Philip Stephens, July 9, 1776, in Morgan, Naval Documents, 998.

<sup>31</sup> Wise to Harrington, June 22 and 27, 1776, in Gregg, Old Cheraws, 268-273. The Royal Highland Emigrants probably included Scots from the Cross Creek (now Fayetteville) area of North Carolina who joined the expedition at Cape Fear following their defeat by the Patriots at Moore's Creek Bridge on February 27, 1776.

<sup>32</sup> A British Journal of the Expedition to Charleston, South Carolina, June 25, 1776, in Morgan, Naval Documents, 747. The creek is known today as Hamlin Creek. Gazette, August 2, 1776, in Gibbes, Documentary History 1776-1782, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Hutson to Robert Gibbes, June 27, 1776, in Divers Accounts of the Battle of Sullivan's Island, (Charleston, SC: The South Carolina Historical Society), 5.

capabilities and limitations of both forces.<sup>34</sup> After ten days of combat at the Breach,<sup>35</sup> Charles Lee ordered 100 more troops to ease the burden on Thomson<sup>36</sup> and sent thanks to his regiment for the “cheerfulness and alacrity for which they have done very hard duty.”<sup>37</sup>

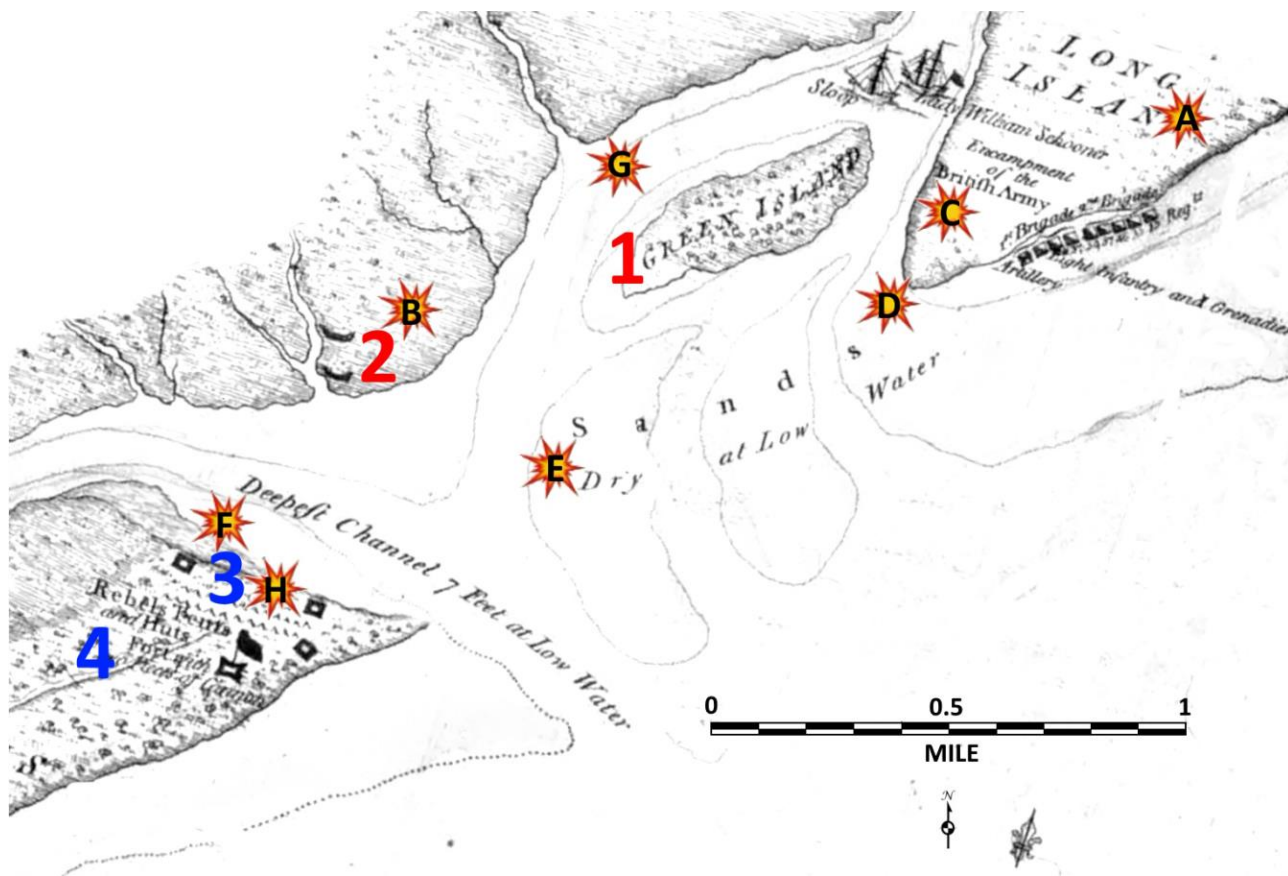


Figure 7. The Figure 5 map annotated to show troop positions and critical movements.

## British Advantage

A successful amphibious attack became plausible when the British army on Long Island discovered and occupied high ground on marsh islands significantly closer to Sullivan’s Island. Portions of Green Island<sup>38</sup> (red 1 on the Figure 7 map) could support infantry and long-range artillery approximately one mile from Sullivan’s Island. High oyster banks on a small island at the west end of the Breach could serve as natural breastworks<sup>39</sup> (red 2 on the map) within a half mile of Thomson’s shoreline defenses (blue 3 on the map). The British gained a tactical advantage by emplacing two howitzers, two Royal mortars, and two 6-pound cannon behind an oyster bank

<sup>34</sup> Wise to Harrington, June 27, 1776, in Gregg, *Old Cheraws*, 271-272; Hutson to Hayne, June 24, 1776, in Hutson, *Letter Book*; Forster, *Diary*, June 21-22, 1776, 67-68. The large numbers of enemy killed and wounded estimated by British surgeon Forster appear exaggerated and are not corroborated by other sources.

<sup>35</sup> Wise to Harrington, June 27, 1776, in Gregg, *Old Cheraws*, 271-272.

<sup>36</sup> Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 165.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Lee to General Armstrong, June 27, 1776, in Lee, *Papers*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Green Island, also called Willow or South Island, remains uninhabited and is now known as Little Goat Island.

<sup>39</sup> Faden, *Plan of Attack*; Campbell, *Plan of the scene*; Campbell, *Charleston and the British attack*. Two symbols for batteries behind the breastworks appear on the Figure 4 map and General Clinton’s battle maps by John Campbell. Notes on the Campbell maps indicate that the artillery retired to the northern oyster bank when the southern bank overflowed. This hummock now known as Clubhouse Point lies between Inlet Creek and Swinton Creek, 350 yards north of the modern bridge connecting Sullivan’s Island and Isle of Palms.

breastwork and firing exploding shells into the advance guard's positions. The gunfire disabled an American 6-pound cannon and caused casualties, proving that the artillery was close enough to suppress the American defenses during an amphibious crossing of the Breach.<sup>40</sup> A Patriot major was sure the British artillery would "cover their landing in spite of all we can do," and he said every officer in the advance guard considered the situation desperate and expected to be sacrificed, although they would "not quit the island were they certain of death."<sup>41</sup> Encouraged, General Clinton and Commodore Parker arranged to launch simultaneous attacks the next day (June 23) if the winds were favorable for the naval attack on the fort. Parker closed a dispatch to Clinton with confidence: "I trust, that I shall to Morrow Evening have the Honor of taking You by the Hand on Sullivan's Island, and congratulating You on the Success of His Majesty's Arms by Land and Sea."<sup>42</sup> The winds were not favorable on June 23, so the British delayed the attack.

## Momentum Shift

Commanding from the mainland, Maj. Gen. Charles Lee gave Moultrie and Thomson scathing critiques for failing to maintain discipline and for firing only within prescribed ranges. He added this postscript to a dispatch: "PS: Those two field pieces at the very end of the point (blue 3 on the map), are so exposed that I desire you will draw them off to a more secure distance from the enemy; in their present situation, it appears to me, they may be carried off whenever the enemy think proper."<sup>43</sup> Danger Thomson immediately established new positions that not only diminished the British artillery threat, but also gave the Americans a critical advantage. He moved his soldiers and cannon away from the Breach to a new location (blue 4 on the map),<sup>44</sup> further outside the effective range of British heavy artillery on Green Island and barely inside the range of British light artillery behind the high oyster banks. From this less vulnerable position, Thomson's cannon remained close enough to fire on unprotected British troops in flatboats before they could land on the Sullivan's Island beach. Gen. Clinton described the momentum shift: "The Rebels had time to perfect another Battery and Intrenchment that was begun on the 22d. This being 500 yards back from their first Position on the Point, in very strong Ground with a much more extended front, having a Battery on the right and a Morass on the left, & abattis in front, obligd us to make an entire Change in the Plan of operations on our Side. For it was apparent, that the few men I had Boats for, advancing singly through a narrow channel uncovered & unprotected, could not now attempt a landing without a manifest Sacrifice."<sup>45</sup> Prompted by Charles Lee's postscript, Danger Thomson and his men had outmaneuvered the British army. Gen. Clinton was dejected after the Americans' rapid change to the new position, which he described as "defended and sustained by 3 to 4000 men [with] a formidable appearance."<sup>46</sup> Actually, the advance guard was only one-fourth that size.

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<sup>40</sup> Forster, *Diary*, June 22, 1776, 68. The advance guard positions 700-1,000 yards away were within the maximum range of these British artillery pieces. Cannon of the era could fire iron balls more than 1,000 yards, Royal mortars fired exploding shells up to 1,000 yards, and howitzers fired balls or shells up to 700 yards. The most effective fire was from less than half these ranges, depending upon powder quality, winds, humidity, crew skills, incoming fire, and other factors.

<sup>41</sup> Wise to Harrington, June 22, 1776, in Gregg, *Old Cheraws*, 269.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Parker to Henry Clinton, June 22, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 689.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Lee to William Moultrie, June 21, 1776, in Lee, *Papers*, 79; Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 158-162. Messages from the mainland to Thomson frequently were sent through Moultrie, who was stationed at the fort between the mainland and the Breach with overall responsibility for the defense of Sullivan's Island.

<sup>44</sup> Faden, *Plan of Attack*; Campbell, *Plan of the scene*; Campbell, *Charleston and the British attack*. The Patriots' first and second lines of defense appear on all three period maps. The second line of defense extended across Sullivan's Island near modern-day Stations 29 and 30.

<sup>45</sup> Willcox, *American Rebellion*, 1:32; Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain from camp on Long Island, July 8, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 983-984. Germain was the British secretary responsible for the American colonies.

<sup>46</sup> Clinton to Germain, July 8, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 984. Thomson's defenses may have deceived the general, or Clinton may have overstated enemy strength to excuse his failure to capture Sullivan's Island.

## Blocked at the Breach

Clinton had few options for his army following Thomson's move, and he may have lost resolve after ten days of planning, skirmishing, and maneuvering. Realizing the hazards of attacking across the well-defended Breach, he offered troops to assist the navy at the fort, which Sir Peter Parker did not accept. He also considered attacking Haddrell's Point at Mount Pleasant on the mainland (Hetheral Pt on the Figure 4 map). This impractical and dangerous alternative diverged from the mission of occupying Sullivan's Island, and it entailed more problems than attacking across the Breach. The British explored the creeks and a two-mile-wide marsh between Long Island and the mainland, and Clinton asked Parker to provide naval support for an attack or diversion toward Mount Pleasant. Parker planned to enfilade the fort with three ships, which he suggested might be useful if the army attacked the mainland.<sup>47</sup> In his final dispatch before the main battle began, the beleaguered general told his naval counterpart that his situation was "rendered more difficult every hour, from the preparations the Rebels are making to defend themselves ... every where intrenching themselves in the strongest manner." With no firm plan for attacking the strengthened American defense, he told Parker, "It is impossible for me at this time and under my Particular Situation to enter upon a detail of the operations of the Troops on the day of your attack, they will in all probability depend upon different circumstances, subject to a variety of changes as occasion may arise." He reiterated his ambiguous promise that "the Troops under my command will cooperate with you to the utmost for the good of His Majestys Service as soon as Wind and Weather shall favor the attack of the Fleet."<sup>48</sup>



*Figure 8. Thomson's troops fired balls and grapeshot from their cannon with guidance from 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment artillerymen. <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>.*

<sup>47</sup> Commodore Sir Peter Parker to Major General Henry Clinton, June 25, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 745. These ships ran aground on June 28 and Clinton did not attack the mainland.

<sup>48</sup> Clinton to Parker, June 26, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 760-61.

## June 28, 1776

Col. William Moultrie and Lt. Col. William Thomson were together at the Breach on Friday morning, June 28, when they saw the British flatboats and warships spring into action. Moultrie galloped back to the fort and led his men to a resounding victory over the Royal Navy in a vicious battle.<sup>49</sup> Period descriptions of the long day's action at the Breach varied from a demonstration reported by Clinton to deadly fire reported by other British and American writers. Some accounts may have been exaggerated, but all agreed that the strong American defense thwarted the land attack and made possible the astounding victory on Sullivan's Island.

The battle began shortly before 11:00 a.m. when the Royal Navy opened fire on the fort, and the British army opened fire on the advance guard. One of Lord Cornwallis's brigades crossed a creek in flatboats and moved to the marsh island, where the British light artillery battery fired from behind a high oyster bank breastwork (red 2 on the Figure 7 map). A 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment sergeant wrote that Thomson's riflemen defeated a surprise musket attack from the west side of the Breach.<sup>50</sup> Cornwallis' surgeon was in a flatboat when he saw a large British Coehorn mortar throwing nine-inch shells into the Patriot trenches and artillery positions. He watched the howitzers, mortars, and cannon raining fire on the American defenses from the oyster bank, and he saw the Americans returning fire with musket balls and grapeshot from the 18-pounder "supplied entirely by slaves."<sup>51</sup>

### Attempted Amphibious Crossings

Tides governed actions in the battle at the Breach. After firing artillery to disrupt the American defenders, the British launched the amphibious operation as the predictable tide was rising several feet from its low point at about 10:30 a.m. to its high point at about 5:00 p.m.<sup>52</sup> Charles Stedman, a respected officer and historian who served with Clinton and Cornwallis, summarized the first crossing attempt: "At twelve o'clock the light-infantry, grenadiers, and the fifteenth regiment, embarked in boats, the floating batteries and armed craft getting under way at the same time to cover their landing on Sullivan's Island."<sup>53</sup> Shallow water and Patriot artillery foiled the British warships' support. Clinton reported, "While the sands were uncovered [i.e., when the tide was still low], I ordered small armed vessels to proceed towards the point of Sullivan's Island but they all got aground."<sup>54</sup> One of his senior aides, Lord Rawdon observed, "The foremost of the Vessels suffered considerably" from Thomson's 18-pounder,<sup>55</sup> and a Loyalist aboard the British armed schooner *Lady William* reportedly said that it was impossible to withstand the destructive fire the Americans poured in.<sup>56</sup>

The flatboat flotilla abandoned the crossing under fire. Stedman wrote, "Scarcely, however, had the detachment proceeded from Long Island, before they were ordered to disembark and return to their encampment: And it must be confessed that, if they had landed, they would have had to struggle with difficulties almost insurmountable."<sup>57</sup> An American stated that one British brigade "Received such a fire from our troops as made them think it would be out of their power to get Thomson's consent to land, without which their Army would have

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<sup>49</sup> Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 174.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, *Reminiscences*, 64-65.

<sup>51</sup> Forster, *Diary*, June 28, 1776, 69-70. Forster's meaning is unclear because the term "slaves" was used for common soldiers as well as enslaved people. African Americans in the advance guard included a drummer mentioned in Wise to Harrington, June 27, 1776, in Gregg, *Old Cheraws*, 272-273, and a soldier granted a federal pension for the service described in his pension application transcribed by C. Leon Harris, <https://revwarapps.org/w11223.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> C. Leon Harris, Ph.D., *An Estimate of Tides During the Battle of Sullivan's Island SC, 28 June 1776*, 2010, accessed January 6, 2026, <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>. Other sources predict tides within minutes of Harris's timeframe.

<sup>53</sup> C. Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War*, vol. 1 (London: J. Murray, J. Debrett, J. Kerby, 1794), 186.

<sup>54</sup> Clinton to Germain, July 8, 1776, in Davies, *American Revolution*, 164; Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 174. The incoming tide would have deepened the inlet channels in favor of the British vessels, although the strongest currents would have made rowing and sailing most challenging during the middle of the tide cycle in the afternoon.

<sup>55</sup> Rawdon to Huntington, July 3, 1776, in *Hastings Family Papers*.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *Traditions*, 95.

<sup>57</sup> Stedman, *History*, 186.

pretty well melted down, by the time they would have got to the Fort.”<sup>58</sup> A Patriot leader wrote that the British “Land Forces on Long Island in the meantime strained every Nerve to effect a Landing on the Back [of Sullivan’s Island], but the Eighteen Pounder with Grape shot spread Havock, Devastation, and Death, and always made them retire faster than they advanced.”<sup>59</sup> Awed by the American cannon loaded with grapeshot, a British soldier wrote to his family, “They would have killed half of us before we could make our landing good.”<sup>60</sup>

Further attempts at amphibious crossings would have been futile. After the low tide and Patriot cannon fire turned back the warships and flatboats, the rising tide forced the British to evacuate their indispensable artillery battery at the high oyster banks. Notes in Clinton’s papers say, “As the Tide rose very fast, it was reported to the General that the Artillery could stay no longer with safety ... as therefore there was no one single thing that could go down to cover our landing, till such protection could be obtained, it was thought by all rash to attempt it.”<sup>61</sup> With the enemy’s warships and most effective artillery out of action, Thomson could more safely move soldiers and cannon from his second line of defense (blue 4 on the Figure 7 map) back to his initial positions at the shore (blue 3 on the map) and fire directly at British troops attempting to cross the Breach. Unprotected soldiers and sailors in slow-moving flatboats had little chance of establishing a beachhead through a point-blank barrage of bullets, balls, and grapeshot.

Maj. Gen. Lee reinforced the advance guard with hundreds of fresh troops from Virginia and South Carolina after 5:00 p.m.<sup>62</sup> The well-armed British continued firing long-distance artillery across the inlet until nightfall, and the Americans, nearly exhausted their supply of ammunition and gunpowder, returned fire. They reserved

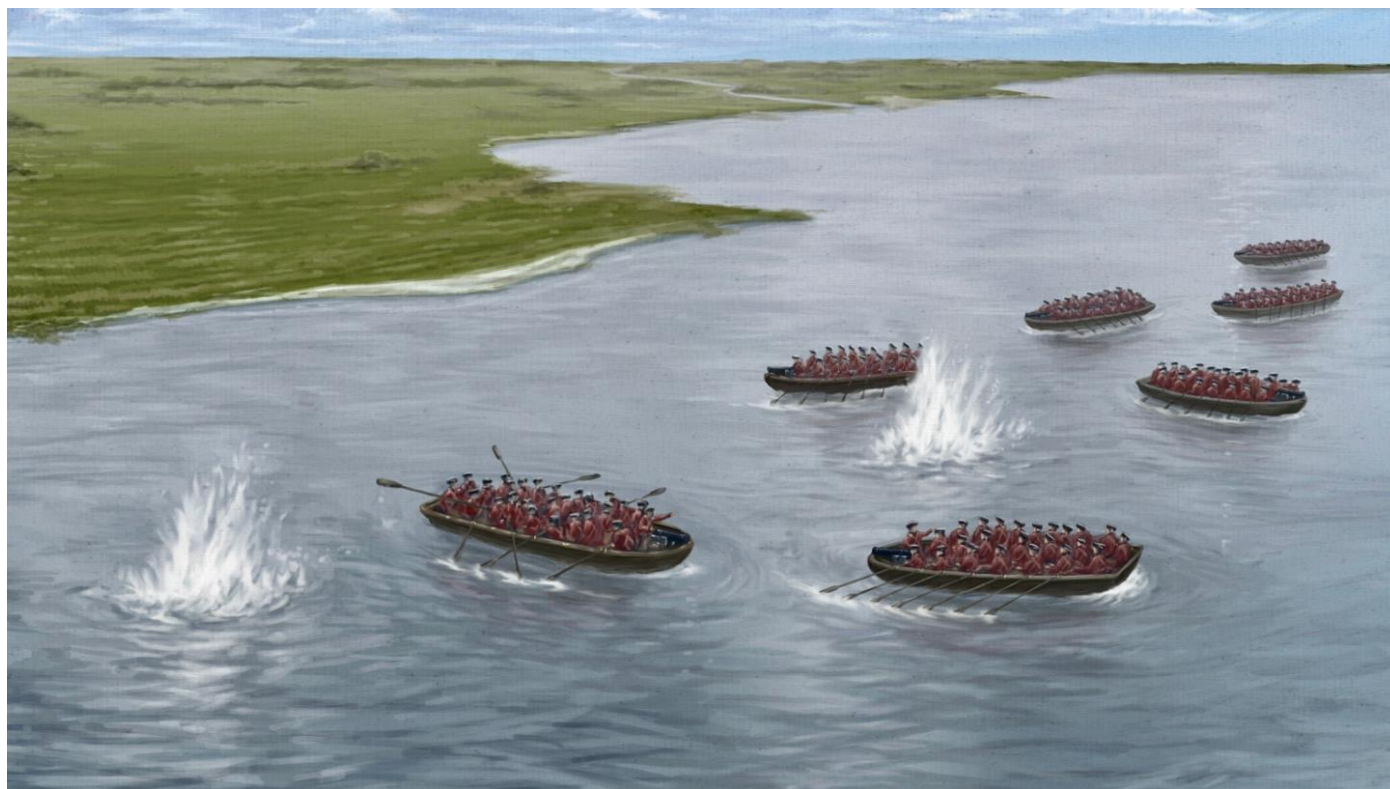


Figure 9. American cannon fire repelled the British amphibious crossing. <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>58</sup> William Bull to John Pringle, 13 August 1776, in Anne King Gregorie, ed., *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, vol. L, 1949 (Charleston, SC: The South Carolina Historical Society), 148.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Hutson to Thomas Hutson, June 30, 1776, in Hutson, *Letter Book*.

<sup>60</sup> Will Falconer to Anthony Falconer, July 13, 1776, in Gibbes, *Documentary History 1776-1782*, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Particulars Relative to the Attack [on Sullivan’s Island], June 29, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 827-828.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Lee to William Moultrie, June 28, 1776, in Lee, *Papers*, 91-92; Drayton, *Memoirs*, 296. Col. Peter Muhlenburg and his 8th Virginia Regiment had marched to Charleston with Maj. Gen. Lee and were stationed at Haddrell’s Point.

enough powder for only two shots from each cannon when the firing stopped.<sup>63</sup> Frustrated and unaware of the severe beating sustained by the Royal Navy at the fort, Clinton met with his officers that night and decided to make another crossing attempt the following morning despite the risk.<sup>64</sup> After eighteen hours under arms in the marsh, Lord Cornwallis' troops were reloaded into the flatboats and started across the Breach at daybreak on June 29. When Clinton learned that the naval assault had failed and the battle was lost, the attack orders were countermanded and the British regulars in the flatboats returned to shore.<sup>65</sup> For the first time in the revolution, American Patriots had defeated a joint attack by the British army and Royal Navy.

## International News

The victory on Sullivan's Island brought hope to the American cause. The stunning news appeared in dispatches, letters, and the same American and European publications as the Declaration of Independence and the massive campaign for New York. King George III, who had personally approved the expedition eight months prior, expressed his dismay with classic British understatement: "Though the attack upon Charles Town has not been crowned with success, it has by no means proved dishonorable; perhaps I should have been as well pleased if it had not been attempted."<sup>66</sup> Clinton and Parker argued after the battle<sup>67</sup> and alluded to each other's deficiencies in their carefully crafted accounts. Clinton depicted his army's fire and movement as a demonstration or diversion and did not comment on the skirmishes, casualties, or attempted crossings.<sup>68</sup> He was highly offended by Parker's official report to the British Admiralty in London, which stated, "Their Lordships will plainly see by this Account, that if the Troops cou'd have co-operated on this Attack, that His Majesty wou'd have been in possession of Sulivan's Island."<sup>69</sup> According to *The Annual Register*, a contemporary summary of 1776 British history, "During this long, hot, and obstinate conflict, the seamen looked frequently and impatiently to the eastward, still expecting to see the land forces advance from Long Island, drive the rebels from their intrenchment, and march up to second the attack on the fort. In these hopes they were grievously disappointed."<sup>70</sup> The epic failure in his first major command would haunt Henry Clinton for the rest of his life, leading the editor of his memoirs to wryly observe, "Britain had worse defeats in the course of the war, but no more egregious fiasco."<sup>71</sup> The British fiasco was a pivotal Patriot triumph that changed the course of the revolution as the British suspended their long-planned Southern strategy. This relieved pressure on the Continental Congress, left no base for British operations in the southern states, and allowed General Washington to fight on one front rather than two. As he battled the British to a stalemate in the north, the south remained relatively calm under Patriot control for the next two and a half years.

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<sup>63</sup> Manuscript of William Henry Drayton, June 28, 1776, in Gibbes, *Documentary History 1776-1782*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Willcox, *American Rebellion*, 1:35; Particulars, June 29, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 827–28. The high tide that coincided with sunrise on June 29 provided deeper water for warships and flatboats, while precluding artillery support from the oyster banks.

<sup>65</sup> Forster, *Diary*, June 29, 1776, 72-73; Particulars, June 29, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 827–28; Charles Lee to General Washington, July 1, 1776, in Lee, *Papers*, 102. The action on June 29 accounts for the second crossing attempt mentioned in several reports of the action at the Breach. Reports of three or more attempts are not well-documented.

<sup>66</sup> King George III to John Montagu, August 21, 1776, in B.R. Barnes and J.H. Owen, eds., *The Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1771-1782*, vol. 4 (London: Navy Records Society, 1932-1938), 44.

<sup>67</sup> George Washington to John Hancock, August 7, 1776, in Founders Online, U.S. National Archives. Deserters from the British warship *Solebay* told General Washington in New York, "That the Admiral turn'd Genl Clinton out of his Ship after the Engagement with a great deal of abuse – Great Differences between the principal naval and military Gentlemen."

<sup>68</sup> Clinton to Germain, July 8, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 984. Gen. Clinton reported that his troops were positioned to attempt a landing on either Sullivan's Island or the mainland. He knew that three Royal Navy frigates ran aground while attempting to enfilade the fort and he did not send troops toward the mainland.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Parker to Philip Stephens, July 9, 1776, in Morgan, *Naval Documents*, 999-1001.

<sup>70</sup> *The Annual Register or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature For the Year 1776*, (London: J. Dodsley, 1779), 160-163. This reference work was widely read on both sides of the Atlantic.

<sup>71</sup> Willcox, *American Rebellion*, xxi. General Clinton learned from the experience. He returned and captured Charleston with a highly successful siege in 1780.

## Unsung Heroes

Lt. Col. William Thomson's advance guard won the battle at the Breach and assisted in the grand victory on Sullivan's Island with brave conduct by people from all echelons of society – Black men and Native Americans as well as White officers, farmers, and workers from the backcountry of South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. Like countless others in forgotten fights, the hastily assembled soldiers were not schooled in the art of warfare, and they made mistakes, yet they overcame adversity to prevail against enormous odds. The Americans strengthened their positions during British delays, adapted smartly to enemy maneuvers, seized the initiative by relocating their defenses, gained valuable skills and confidence over ten days of combat, and took advantage of the terrain and tides on June 28. Danger Thomson and his diverse band of unsung heroes were instrumental in winning one of the earliest, most complete, and most shocking victories of the American Revolution.



Figure 10. Thomson Park commemorates the battle at Breach Inlet near 3217 Middle St on Sullivan's Island, SC and online at <https://thomsonpark.wordpress.com/>.

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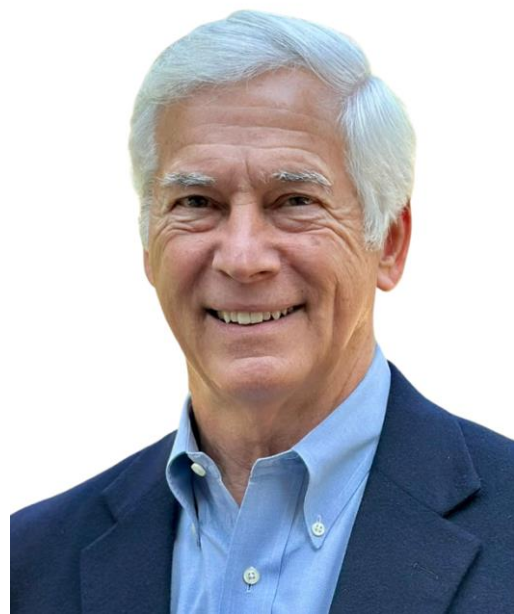
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## About the Author



Doug MacIntyre is a retired business executive who promotes South Carolina’s vital role in the American Revolution. His research into the poorly understood Battle at Breach Inlet led to the creation of Thomson Park at the site and the publication of new information in the *Journal of the American Revolution* and other periodicals. A fellow of the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution, Doug has served on the board of the South Carolina Historical Society and chaired the Fort Sumter—Fort Moultrie Historical Trust, now Friends of Charleston National Parks. He was an original trustee of the South Carolina American Revolution Trust (SCART) and co-founder of SC250 Charleston. MacIntyre speaks to a variety of audiences about the revolution, leads tours, and recently helped develop the Battle of Sullivan Island film <https://youtu.be/V065pp-iZ0w>.

He earned a B.S. degree from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and served five years in the U.S. Army as an infantry platoon leader, staff officer, and company commander. He earned a M.S. degree in Business Administration with honors from Boston University and completed advanced management programs at Harvard, Wharton, and Stanford. His business career spanned the spectrum from startups to Fortune 500 companies, leading technology companies through formation, global expansion, public offerings, mergers, and acquisitions as president and CEO. Doug served as chair of the American Software Association and founder and director of local and national industry, technology, and civic organizations. In retirement, he has worked to foster South Carolina’s technology economy, natural resources, and history.

# THE B R I T



Welcome to my column on the dreaded “Bloody Backs” and their Provincial allies. American writers have regurgitated the same propaganda and written from ignorance about the Crown Forces in the Southern Campaign. I will attempt to educate the readers of the Journal about the Tommies who were fighting to restore the “Rights of Englishmen” to the rebellious colonies.

*Your True and Loyal Servant.*

Kim R. Stacy, 84th Regiment of Foot (Royal Highland Emigrants) retired.

## **A Short History of the 7th Regiment of Foot (Royal Fusiliers) in the Southern Campaign**

One of the most misunderstood British regiments to campaign in the South was the 7th (Royal Fusilier) Regiment. The regiment garrisoned Upper Canada, and it was largely destroyed and its Colours captured when the Bostonians invaded what was intended to become the 14th Colony in 1775. The 7th was recruited to full strength in England and sent back to the colonies. Remnants of the 7th fought in many of the major battles in the North.

A misconception is that the Regiment was composed entirely of recruits! The word “recruit” had a different meaning in the 18th Century. Yes, men were recruited and initially referred to by their officers as “recruits.” However, after what we would regard today as Basic Training, they spent the next two years drilling in Light Infantry tactics practiced in America before shipping to America. They constantly trained in marksmanship by firing live ammunition at targets, and the best marksmen were recognized. When they landed in Charles Town, South Carolina, with General Sir Henry Clinton in 1779, they were well drilled, had full confidence in their officers and noncommissioned officers, and were well prepared by their training. Many veterans had been bloodied in the Northern Campaigns.

The 7th took part in the Siege of Charles Town in May 1780 and later acted as convoy escorts, delivering essential supplies to Camden and Ninety-Six. They frequently engaged in skirmishes while safeguarding their convoys. Their conduct was commendable, and they gained valuable combat experience. Additionally, they maintained garrisons along the supply routes and served as a training cadre under Major Patrick Ferguson, instructing his Loyalist Militia. “Recruits” would not have been assigned such a significant role. They also engaged in anti-partisan warfare, a task that would have been difficult for typical ‘recruits’ to succeed in, especially guerrilla tactics.

The 7th had small detachments with General Clinton throughout his campaigning. They served mostly as scouts and were with him from the “Race to the Dan” to Yorktown, Virginia. On January 17, 1781, at the disastrous Battle at the Cow Pens, Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton’s forces were overwhelmingly defeated, allowing major attacks on backcountry logistics posts and garrisons from that point. The 7th Regiment, with 170 men, suffered

around 21 killed and 148 captured. They lost the Regimental Colours once again! Those who managed to escape, and those on convoy duty, were sent to Charles Town to garrison and rest, then shipped to occupy Savannah, Georgia until the end of active warfare in the South, and were shipped back to England to reform and refit.

Their annual issue of uniforms consisted of red short coats, waistcoats, trousers, and cocked hats. In the South, contrary to popular myths, they did not wear their coats or waistcoats in the heat of the day. Many orders from other regiments operating in the area confirm this. Waistcoats were worn in the chill of the night, and redcoats wore them on guard duty and in anticipation of combat. By the end of the year, their poorly made uniforms were rags.

### ***Significant Actions (a short list):***

1. 20 June 1779. Stono Ferry & Siege of Charles Town
2. May 1780. Garrison Ninety-Six and controlling the surrounding countryside
3. June 1780. Garrison Camden. Training Militia.
4. Late June 1780. Garrison Monks Corner, about half of the men are sick and sent to the hospital in Charles Town.
5. July 1780. Camden garrison sent to rejoin the Regiment in Charles Town. Most are sick. Considered “unfit,” in rags, with weapons inoperable. Only about 220 men are “fit for duty.”
6. September 1780. About 200 “fit” men marched on George Town, capturing the American supplies. A troop of men was mounted and sent back to Camden to inform Marion and other rebels.
7. October 1780. 106 men in hospital in Camden left the garrison vulnerable to attack.
8. December 1780. New uniform (yearly issue) arrives and is distributed. Convoy detachment participates in the embarrassment of Marion at Halfway Swamp.
9. January 1781. The regiment reorganized “fit” men into 4 companies, as 165 of about 240 total men were in hospital (out of a regiment of 500 men who started the Southern Campaign). The four companies were sent back to Ninety-Six. The rest were victims of disease. Besieged by the Insurgents.
10. 17 January 1781. Defeated at Cow Pens.
11. Late February – March 1781. “Race to the Dan” and Guilford Courthouse.
12. 6 July 1781. Company in battle at Green Springs.
13. 19 October 1781. Surrender at Yorktown.
14. December 1781. The remaining men were sent to Charles Town and then to Savannah.
15. 1782. Small-unit action in foraging for food and fodder for the garrisons at Charles Town and Savannah. In August, the Regiment evacuated the South, returned to New York City, and was then sent to England after the end of hostilities (November 1783). The Regiment reformed and refitted and went on to an illustrious career into the 20th Century.

### **Further Reading:**

The 7th Royal Fusiliers and their Part in the American War for Independence:

<https://www.fusiliermuseumlondon.org/download?id=12390>

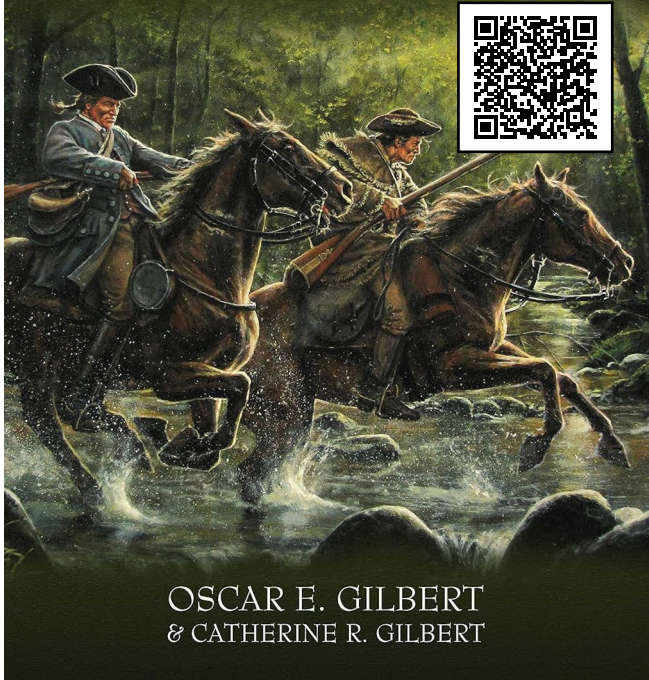
The Historical Record of the Seventh Regiment, or, The Royal Fusiliers:

[https://ia601705.us.archive.org/6/items/cihm\\_48374/cihm\\_48374.pdf](https://ia601705.us.archive.org/6/items/cihm_48374/cihm_48374.pdf)

Also see the many 7Th Regiment of Foot reenactor websites such as <https://www.7thregimentoffoot.com>

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5. Submissions must be in MS Word format, letter size, with 1-inch margins, single-spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman font. The cover page must include the author's name and contact information.
6. Chicago Manual of Style, the latest edition, will be used for footnotes, endnotes, and bibliographies. ([https:// www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html).)
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# BATTLE OF SULLIVAN'S ISLAND FILM

Produced by Wide Awake Films, journey back in time to learn how the Patriot Forces defeated the British Navy for the first time on June 28, 1776 — what would later become known from 1777 on as “Carolina Day”. Funded by the South Carolina American Revolution Sestercentennial Commission.



Click image to view or watch on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V065pp-iZ0w>



