The Rice Kings’ Revolt

The Revolutionary Experience in South Carolina

1774-1776

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# Table of Contents

Author’s Note..................................................................................................................3

Foreword..........................................................................................................................5

Part I
A Divided Society
Pre Revolutionary South Carolina (1760-1774)............................................................9

Part II
The Rice King’s Coup
South Carolina’s Revolution Begins (January 1775-March 1776)...............................20

Part III
The Battle of Sullivan’s Island (June 28, 1776)...............................................................36

Afterword..........................................................................................................................71

Appendixes

Appendix I
Major Figures..................................................................................................................73

Appendix II
Chronology.......................................................................................................................74

Appendix II
Maps.................................................................................................................................76

Bibliography......................................................................................................................80
Author’s Note

This study grew out of another much larger work entitled *The Struggle for the South 1775-1781* in which I chronicle the course of the American Revolution in the southern states from beginning to end. Early on in the process of writing that piece I became bogged down in researching and writing about the early Revolution in South Carolina. At the time, I considered it to be the unimportant to the narrative at large and wanted to rush through it, but fortunately I stayed the course. Later, I realized that the reason that section took so long was because there was a great deal of work to be done in that area. At that point, I decided to concentrate my thesis on the early stages of the war in South Carolina.

There is one great flaw in this study that I would like to acknowledge. It is primarily derived from the correspondence of the lowcountry elite, high ranking British and Continental military officers, and other British government officials. As such, there are groups, who are not represented in the source material. The most visibly absent is the voice of African American slaves, who make up a majority of the population of the South Carolina lowcountry. Also missing are the voices of the lower class whites of the backcountry, and voices of the ordinary British and American sailors and soldiers who participated in the Battle of Sullivan’s Island. Each of these silent groups is very important, and their story appears in multiple places throughout the study in the shape of descriptions from those sources that I do have. In order to understand the experiences of these groups I have been forced to rely on the descriptions from those voices that I have included.
I would like to thank Professor Edward Pearson for helping me in transforming this project from a dream into a reality. I would also like to thank my parents, Thomas and Corinne Weber for their support, and making this project possible by giving me the resources to purchase the numerous books needed for this piece and ability to be in Charleston, South Carolina this past summer. Writing this piece has been the most educational and enjoyable part of my academic career at Franklin and Marshall. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

James B. Weber
Foreword

The American Revolution is undoubtedly one of, if not, the most important event in American history. The conventional national historical narrative on the beginning of the American Revolution is largely based on events that occurred in the Northern provinces. When examining the first two years of the conflict, 1775 and 1776, historians tend to focus on events in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, as exemplified in the recent popular history by David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005). In *1776*, McCullough completely focuses his narrative in the north. In fact, the important events unfolding in Charleston, South Carolina during the summer of 1776 are only mentioned in passing. John Ferling’s more academic political history, *A Leap in the Dark* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) also glosses over events occurring in South Carolina and the lower south, to focus on the critical events unfolding in the north. The foremost narrative history, by Robert Middlekauff entitled *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) emphasizes events occurring in the north during the beginning of the war. It does not center on the south until after 1778. In *Rebels and Redcoats: the American Revolution Through British Eyes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990) Christopher Hibbert briefly focuses on the potential of use of black slaves to put down the revolt, and first British southern strategy, and then shifts his narrative to the north again. Unfortunately, what is lost in these conventional national narratives is the understanding that the Revolutionary experience was different in each of the thirteen colonies, and the unique experience of the coming of the American Revolution in the southern provinces. This case study, entitled *The Rice Kings’ Revolt, the Revolutionary Experience in South*
Carolina 1774-1776, is an attempt to fill the void created by conventional narratives and focuses on the events unfolding in South Carolina during the early stages of the American War for Independence.

The Revolutionary experience in South Carolina is unique. It was more of a “coup de estate” then a “revolution.” In South Carolina, the wealthy lowcountry planters, or Rice Kings, engineered the end of royal rule in the province and stepped into the void created by the destruction of the British colonial government, to install themselves at the head of the province’s new civil government. The study’s first section demonstrates how the end of royal rule in South Carolina came about, how the lowcountry elites defeated or neutralized all of the potential threats to their power within the province, and obtained complete power in the region.

The study’s second section focuses on the Battle of Sullivan’s Island in 1776, which is the most important military event in the south during the first three years of war. American victory at Sullivan’s Island illustrated to the British the resolve of the American southern colonist, secured thirty months of peace for the south, and also cemented the Rice Kings’ monopoly on power. The Battle of Sullivan’s Island secured the Rice Kings’ position because it removed the threat of an external British invasion that would have unseated them before they had the chance to firmly entrench themselves in power. Often the Battle of Sullivan’s Island is overlooked by historians. It is generally mentioned in passing in conventional military histories, and is regulated to the introductory chapters of the numerous military histories of the war in the south. For example, David Hackett Fischer’s *Washington’s Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) which centers on the events occurring in the northern theater of
the war (The Fall of New York, and The Battles of Trenton and Princeton) during the same period mentions the Battle of Sullivan’s Island, or the defense of Charleston, less than five times. Generally, military histories of the American Revolution in the southern provinces tend to center on events that occurred after the fall of Charleston in 1780, as in Burke Davis’ *The Cowpens-Guilford Courthouse Campaign* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), Lawrence E. Babits’ *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), and Carl P. Borick’s *A Gallant Defense: The Siege of Charleston, 1780* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003). In addition, several biographies have been written about key figures in the war in the south including, Don Higginbotham’s *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), and Terry Golway’s *Washington’s General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005). John Buchanan’s classic popular history of the war in the American South, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997) follows the convention of using the Battle of Sullivan’s Island as an introduction to the war in the south. So to does Henry Lumpkin’s *From Savannah to Yorktown* (New York: toExcel Press, 2000) Hopefully, this piece does justice to the importance of the Battle of Sullivan’s Island, and illustrates its importance to Carolinian history.

One cannot overlook the importance of the early stages of the American Revolution in South Carolina because it is the period in which the wealthy lowcountry elites gained complete political and economic power in the province. They retained supreme power there for more then eight decades, until the closing months of the
American Civil War. From their position atop South Carolina society, the Rice Kings played a crucial role in the nation’s political history in the period between independence and the end of the Civil War. For good or evil, their influence marked important national events from the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to the Nullification Crisis of 1832, to the Compromise of 1850, and ultimately, South Carolina’s secession from the Union in December 1860, resulting in the Civil War.
Part I

A Divided Society

Pre-Revolutionary South Carolina (1760-1774)

On February 10, 1763, the Treaty of Paris was signed, concluding almost a decade of conflict between Great Britain, France, Spain, and their respective Native American allies in North America. In the immediate aftermath of the peace of Paris, the British government was confronted by the challenge of administering and defending an impressive overseas empire that had just doubled in size. In order to more effectively protect and rule its vast new North American empire, the British Parliament began to enact new legislation aimed at streamlining and centralizing the administration of the American colonies.

During the decade following the end of the Seven Years’ War each of the thirteen American colonies was confronted by this new British attempt to streamline imperial administration through Parliamentary legislation. The new legislation affected each of the colonies differently, as each colony had its own individual economic, social, and political situation. In the southern colonies, the social, economic, and political dynamics were very different from that of the Mid-Atlantic colonies and the northern colonies. These conditions in the colonial south created a revolutionary experience that was quite different from that of the northern colonies. To understand the unique revolutionary experience in the southern colonies, the focus here will be on the end of royal rule in South Carolina and the colony’s movement to independence.
Colonial South Carolina

On the eve of the American Revolution, there were about 2.5 million people living in British North America. The total population of pre-Revolutionary South Carolina was 174,550. In terms of population, the colony of South Carolina paled in comparison to the larger American colonies. At the time, the populations of Pennsylvania (327,305) and Massachusetts (317,760) were three times that of South Carolina. The largest of the British colonies in North America, Virginia (538,000), had a population five times the size of South Carolina’s population.1 Despite its small population, South Carolina was among the wealthiest of the American colonies. Its capital, Charleston, was one of the five largest cities in British North America and was the social, political, and economic center of the lower south. In fact, the aggregate wealth of inventoried estates in Charleston was six times greater than that of Philadelphia.2 Also, the richest man in the American colonies in terms of per capita wealth, Peter Manigault, was a resident of South Carolina, and eight of the next ten wealthiest Americans were also South Carolinians.3

By the mid-eighteenth century, South Carolina could easily be divided into two distinct geographic regions, the lowcountry and the backcountry. The lowcountry was the coastal region in which most of the cash crop plantation agriculture took place, and it was this agriculture which was the source of the colony’s immense wealth. The lowcountry was characterized by the numerous rivers, tidal flats, and swamps that crisscrossed through it. This warm, wet, tidal region was ideal for growing rice and indigo. Both crops

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1 John W. Gordon, South Carolina and the American Revolution (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 17.  
3 Gordon, 15.
flourished in the climate of the colony’s coastal lowcountry.\textsuperscript{4} The incredible fortunes of the lowcountry aristocracy were based on the transatlantic sale of these valuable cash crops in Britain. In addition, much of its financial success can be attributed to use of African slave labor. A sixth of the total slave population of the thirteen British colonies lived in South Carolina. Fully fifty-nine percent or some 104,000 people of the colony’s population of 174,550 were enslaved Africans, and the vast majority of these South Carolinian slaves lived and worked in the lowcountry. In fact, by the time of the Revolution only twenty percent of the colony’s white population lived in the lowcountry, meaning that in the coastal parishes there were clear African majorities.\textsuperscript{5} The planter’s greatest fear was a slave uprising, so they maintained strict control over the slave population. Those whites living in the lowcountry either were members of or worked for the planter aristocracy, or Rice Kings. This class consisted of the white slaveholding, landowning planters and their families. Most of these whites were of English descent and members of the Church of England.\textsuperscript{6} Because of their wealth, the lowcountry planters not only dominated the colony economically but politically.

The backcountry was about fifty miles inland from the coast. It was a striking contrast to the lowcountry. Of the colony’s about 70,000 white residents, more than two thirds of them, or some 46,000, lived in the backcountry.\textsuperscript{7} The lowcountry planters considered the backcountry important for two reasons. First, it stood as a buffer between the valuable plantations of the lowcountry and the threat of potential Cherokee or Creek Indian uprisings. Second, the backcountry provided a white manpower reserve that could

\textsuperscript{5} Gordon, 17; and Edgar, xi.
\textsuperscript{6} Gordon, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{7} Edgar, xi, and 2.
be called upon should a slave uprising occur in the lowcountry. The backcountry was settled by German, Welsh and Scots-Irish immigrants during the second half of the eighteenth century. The vast majority of those living in the backcountry were Scots-Irish. The Scots-Irish had extensive kinship networks in the colony, and were fiercely proud of both their heritage and their Presbyterian religion. In contrast, the majority of the lowcountry planters were Anglican. The religious difference between the two groups was another source of constant friction. Also, the residents of the backcountry were largely subsistence farmers who sold any surplus to their neighbors or into the lowcountry.

**The Cherokee War of 1760 and The Regulator Crisis**

Migration into the region was temporarily halted by the Cherokee War of 1760. While Britain and France were engulfed in a global struggle for dominance, the Cherokee tribe, native to the western portion of South Carolina, allied itself with the French because they believed that a French victory would limit further settlement in their native territory. The Cherokee terrorized the backcountry settlers of the British colony of South Carolina. The Cherokee threat forced many backcountry settlers to abandon their homesteads for the safety of frontier forts. The Cherokee raids of 1760-61 greatly destabilized the region. Law and order in the backcountry broke down in the face of the onslaught. Despite their initial successes, the Cherokee were eventually defeated. After their defeat the Cherokees’ power in western South Carolina and Georgia was almost completely broken. By the time of the Revolution only about three hundred and fifty Cherokee warriors still lived within the boundaries of South Carolina.

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8 Buchanan, 20.
9 Edgar, 3-11; Gordon, 19.
10 Edgar, 11-14; Gordon, 19.
In the years following the Cherokee War, the backcountry was fraught with violence and crime by roving bands of outlaws. The colonial government of Charleston was unable to extend its influence and establish and maintain order much beyond the lowcountry, and at this time it did not make an effort to do more. There were no courts or jails in the backcountry: any legal business in the colony occurred in Charleston, and there were no backcountry representatives in the colony’s legislature. This left the honest, law abiding residents of the backcountry with no redress for grievances. They were forced to defend themselves from the outlaws who plagued the backcountry in the wake of the Cherokee War. The lack of order in the backcountry eventually led to a crisis in the late 1760’s. Unable to get aid from the government in Charleston, many settlers in the backcountry decided it was time to take matters into their own hands. These men called themselves Regulators and sought to establish law and order in the backcountry. Despite their lofty moral goals, the Regulators turned out to be little more than a violent vigilante group that terrorized not only criminals but also innocent settlers. This period of unrest and vigilante terrorism became known as the Regulator Crisis. Eventually, the colonial government in Charleston was forced to do something about the lack of order in the backcountry and the brutal and high-handed Regulators. The colonial authorities came down harshly on the Regulators’ effort to establish order in the backcountry. The colonial government in Charleston decided to establish courts and bring the rule of law to the backcountry. Several of the Regulators were tried and convicted for crimes by the Charleston authorities.

The Regulator Crisis created sharp animosities between former Regulators and those whom they terrorized. It also created a sharp divide between the lowcountry and the
backcountry. In the backcountry, both former Regulators and their victims equally distrusted and despised the wealthy members of the government in Charleston, because it had refused to step in to establish order in the backcountry in the first place and then, when some of the backcountry folk tried to do it themselves, the colonial government came down harshly on them for their effort.\footnote{Edgar, 15-25; also see, Gordon, 18-19.}

**South Carolina’s Constitutional Crisis**

At the time the British imperial crisis of the mid-1760s came to a head, it would seem that South Carolina was an unlikely candidate for revolution. It was the wealthiest of the thirteen colonies, and the men who dominated the colony politically owed much of their wealth to South Carolina’s membership in the British Empire. Most of the lowcountry elites’ fortunes were made because of the British mercantile system. The planters exported their crops through Charleston to the Atlantic sea lanes which were guarded by the Royal Navy. The sale of the crops in England generated large revenues for the planters. The planters’ success was based on the protection of British military and naval power, which secured the colony’s western frontier and maritime trade routes. Despite the apparent lack of cause for the lowcountry elites to rebel against British authority, circumstances arouse during the early 1770’s that drove a wedge between the Carolina elites and the British Government. As a majority of the lowcountry elites came to support the idea of the revolution, those living in the backcountry were force to side either with their fellow colonists in the lowcountry or the King and his government. In the simplest terms, the imperial crisis of the 1770’s forced each white South Carolinian to decide whether to side with the Royal Governor, Parliament, and the King, or the revolutionary lowcountry elites. In the end, for most, their choice was not about the high
political principles which the revolution claimed to champion, but it came down to
aligning themselves with the side they stood to lose the least and gain the most with.

Resistance to British rule in South Carolina began in 1765 with a riotous protest
in Charleston against the Stamp Act, during which the homes of two stamp collectors
where burned to the ground by a mob. Through the next decade of constitutional
dispute with Britain, most of South Carolina stood firmly in support of the other colonies
in the north. For the most part, South Carolina’s response to the imperial crisis was
formulated by the lowcountry elites. Most in the backcountry were too involved in either
rebuilding their lives in the wake of the Regulator crisis or hacking a homestead out of
the wilderness to really be able to actively participate in any political resistance against
the British. Furthermore, the lowcountry planters’ stranglehold on power within the
colony made it very difficult for anyone in the backcountry to assert political power, and
obviously, the fifty-nine percent of the population who were enslaved had no public
political voice. These wealthy planters really did not care about the taxes being levied in
London, as they could easily afford them. However, what did concern them was anything
that threatened their monopoly of political and economic power within South Carolina.
The British Government’s attempt to centralize imperial power through levying taxes on
the colonies was seen by the lowcountry elite as an infringement upon their own power.
This makes the Revolutionary Experience in South Carolina very unique. The conflict
within South Carolina was not a dispute over the rights of man, or a simply constitutional
debate over the right to tax. It was a bitter struggle for the lowcountry elite to maintain

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12 John Ferling, A Leap in the Dark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 35; also see, Christopher
their power and possibly gain more. As time went on the planters adopted much of the revolutionary rhetoric of their comrades to the north, but no amount of rhetoric can mask their true intent.

Nowhere are the motives of the lowcountry elites more evident then in the sequence of events that led to the end of royal rule in South Carolina and the beginning of its quest for independence. To understand this critical sequence of events, it is important to outline the structure of South Carolina’s colonial government. The colony’s government consisted of three key parts. The first important component was the office of the Royal Governor. The governor was appointed by the Crown and was the king’s representative in the colony. In most cases, he was a former British soldier or sailor of aristocratic birth. The second body was the Royal Council. The council was the upper house of the colony’s legislature. It consisted of men appointed by the governor. The third component of the colony’s government was the legislature’s lower house, called the Commons House of Assembly. This body was elected by the minority that was eligible to vote in the colony, and was drawn largely from the planter aristocracy. Only a few representatives from the backcountry were included in the assembly, and these seats were granted after the Regulator Crisis. It was through the Commons House of Assembly that the lowcountry elites were able to exert their will on the colony.

In 1770 and 1771, the colony’s government was confronted by a structural crisis that eventually resulted in the breakdown of royal government and the beginning of the formation of a new independent government. The dispute arose over who had the authority to decide how the colony’s tax dollars should be spent. The Royal Governor

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13 Edgar, 26-27.
14 Gordon, 17.
and the Royal Council asserted that the Commons House of Assembly could not authorize expenditures without their approval. In addition, the governor asserted that the Commons House of Assembly did not have the authority to authorize expenditures outside the boundaries of South Carolina. These assertions infuriated the lowcountry planters because the assembly was their chief means of exercising power, and without the ability to appropriate funds the body became almost impudent.16

British officials supported the claims of the Governor and the Council, which led the planters to feel as though their power was being further undermined. The resulting standoff led to the breakdown of royal rule in the colony as the Commons House of Assembly refused to authorize any expenditures requested by the Governor and further refused to allow any withdrawals from the colony’s treasury. William Bull, the Lieutenant Governor, recalled the cause of the standoff between the Governor and the South Carolina Assembly in a 1774 report to the Earl of Dartmouth. Bull wrote of the crisis:

They [the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly] will not submit to pass money bills framed according to the royal instructions of 14th April, 1770… They loudly declare against the inserting [of] the clauses required by the instruction to guard against their drawing money out of the Treasury.17

Eventually the standoff between the Commons House of Assembly and the Governor led to a complete breakdown in the colony’s system of government as the assembly simply refused to meet when called by the Governor. The everyday administrative responsibilities of the colony’s royal government also effectively shut down as no funds

16 Edgar, 27
were authorized for its continued operation. In the same report to Dartmouth, William Bull wrote of the crisis created by the government shutdown:

> We are now in the course of the sixth year since any provision has been made for the established and contingent charges of government, to the Governor, to the Secretary, Clerk of the Council and Assembly, to the sheriff for the subsistence of prisoners… and many other creditors of the public of inferior amount. \(^{18}\)

Although the Governor and his council remained in Charleston they ruled in name only. From this point on, the majority of South Carolinians simply ignored British rule and set about creating a new government. \(^{19}\)

In 1773, prominent South Carolinians met and formed a body called the General Committee. The committee was the first step in creating a new government, and it took the important step of organizing a meeting in Charleston on July 6, 1774 to address the worsening crisis with Britain. This assembly, called the General Meeting, decided to stand with the colonies in the north and elected delegates to represent South Carolina at the First Continental Congress. The General Meeting also created a committee of ninety-nine (15 artisans, 15 merchants, and 69 planters) to act as a temporary de facto government. During the next six months, the committee organized elections for a more new stable independent government to become known as the First South Carolina Provincial Congress. By the beginning of 1775, months before the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord, the Provincial Congress stood as the legitimate independent government of South Carolina. \(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Lieutenant Governor William Bull to the Earl of Dartmouth, March 10, 1774. *Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 8*, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 63-64; also see, Edgar, 27.

\(^{20}\) Edgar, 27-29.
The sequence of events leading up to the formation of the Provincial Congress illustrates the unique Revolutionary experience in South Carolina. On the eve of the Revolution, South Carolinian society contained multiple demographic groups, and each of these groups had its known interest. The different interests of the various groups dictated which side they were going to support in the coming conflict. To the South Carolinian Whigs, the physical manifestation of British tyranny was not the presence British troops, as it was in Boston, but the Royal Governor’s insistence on obtaining the power to tax from the colony’s assembly. The power to tax was the source of the lowcountry planters’ political power and they guarded it jealously. For the Carolina Rice Kings, most of whom became staunch Whigs, the threat posed to their political power and influence by the Royal Governor and his Council was a very tangible representation of British tyranny. In South Carolina, the wealthy planters of the lowcountry decided to support the idea of American independence to protect their immense power and wealth. However, in order for the lowcountry elites to achieve their goal of independence, they would have to either gain the support of the other demographic groups within the colony or neutralize their potential for opposition.
Part II

The Rice King’s Coup

South Carolina’s Revolution Begins (January 1775-March 1776)

In the spring of 1775, the political debate between Britain and the thirteen North American colonies developed into a full blown civil war. On the eve of the war, the vast majority of British military power in North America was concentrated on the frontier, in Canada, and in Boston. Boston had by far the largest concentration of British troops on the continent. The policymakers in London believed that the city to be the cradle of the revolt. However, the brewing conflict was not a regional issue unique to Boston or New England. By late spring, Americans in all thirteen colonies had grievances with Britain and they were willing to confront the British with the force of arms.

The war began on April 19, 1775, as the first shots were discharged by British regulars and colonial militia on a New England town green in Lexington, Massachusetts. The clash between British regulars and colonists that early April morning reverberated throughout North America. As word of the outbreak of hostiles in Boston spread, Whigs in South Carolina, who were predominantly lowcountry elites, sought to secure power in their province while British attention was focused on Boston. At the same time, royal governors were informing the ministry in London that the southern provinces were bastions of strong loyalty to the crown, and that a small show of force could quickly quell the rebellion there. Despite constant pleas for aid sent to Britain by southern governors like Josiah Martin and William Campbell, southern loyalists were left to fend for themselves as London’s attention remained focused on events in the north. Between April 1775 and June 1776, the American Revolution in the southern colonies was a truly civil
war as the Whigs fought their loyalists neighbors to secure power in the absence of a
British military presence and began to create their own state government in South
Carolina. In South Carolina, the Whigs were so successful at securing power and creating
a stable government that by the time the British were able send a military expedition
there in June 1776, the colonists were ready to repel it.

When word of Lexington and Concord reached South Carolina, the de facto
government, the Provincial Congress, moved to create a “Council of Safety” which was
charged with the defense of the province and vested with executive powers to deal with
crisis. The Provincial Congress also ordered the formation of three standing regiments
(two of infantry and one of mounted rangers). These units later became the core of South
Carolina’s Continental Army regular contingent. Throughout the lowcountry, there was
talk of war and the Whigs moved quickly to secure powder and arms. The colonists
seized arsenals and magazines throughout the lowcountry, and they secured the arms
stored in the statehouse on Meeting Street in downtown Charleston. The whole of the
lowcountry was struck with a patriotic fervor and an obsession for arms and all things
military. Henry Laurens, the President of the Provincial Congress, described this
phenomenon in a letter to his son Henry, by writing:

America is now become the seat of discord, of horrible civil war… So[uth]
Carolina is now in arms, even little Georgia is far from neutral. In this Country
where we cannot boast of numbers we are preparing to do as much as the best,
that is to say, to do all we can, in our own defence against the hand of Tyranny.
The sound of drums & fifes is heard all day long. Grenadier, Light Infantry,
Artillery & the ordinary militia companies are trained to arms every day and some
of them exercise and march with such exactness and regularity as show that they
are in earnest.22

21 John W. Gordon, South Carolina and the American Revolution (Columbia: University of South Carolina
22 Henry Laurens to Henry Laurens JR. May 26, 1775, The Papers of Henry Laurens Vol. 10 December 12,
This enthusiasm for the Revolution was rampant in the lowcountry. This is an example of a phenomenon that Charles Royster has characterized as “Rage Militaire,” or a general confidence and enthusiasm for all things military throughout the colonies in the immediate wake of the outbreak of the war. By the summer of 1775, most whites in the lowcountry were in the Whig camp, and the lowcountry elite sought to take advantage of this groundswell of support for the Revolution and secure the independence of the province. In light of their popularity, the Provincial Congress decided to dispatch delegates to the Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia. South Carolina sent some of the most influential men in the province, including John and Edward Rutledge, Christopher Gadsden, Thomas Lynch and Arthur Middleton. While these delegates were not formally charged with moving South Carolina toward independence, their appointment to Congress was a signal that the leadership of the province believed that South Carolina had to be apart of the collective response by the colonies to the crisis with Britain.

Besieged British officials in the south were quick to realize the opportunity that the various contours of southern society offered. Although lowcountry Whigs tried to present the appearance of a unified front in opposition to the British, the truth was that of the four significant demographic groups in the region, only the lowcountry whites were unshakably in the patriot camp. The backcountry whites, the enslaved Africans, and the southern Native American tribes (the Catawba, the Cherokee and the Creek) were all either neutral or potentially hostile to the patriot cause.

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While those in the lowcountry relished their enthusiasm for the American cause, the vast majority of those in the backcountry watched the events unfolding before them with a skeptical eye. While there were Whigs in the backcountry, the vast majority of the population of the inland counties was either neutral or outright loyalist. The harsh reality of life in the backcountry meant that few residents of the inland counties paid much attention to the imperial crisis as it developed. In fact, many in the backcountry had greater grievances with the Provincial Congress, and the old, now-disbanded Commons House of Assembly, than they did with the British Parliament. The timing of the Regulator Crisis (1767-1769) had coincided with the rise of the imperial crisis in the mid and late 1760s, so the vast majority in the backcountry was occupied with a crisis of their own while their lowcountry counterparts were beginning to develop their staunch resistance to British rule. Many backcountry men despised the lowcountry elites, and still held them responsible for the numerous injustices of the Regulator Crisis. In addition, the taxes levied by Parliament had little or no economic effect in the backcountry. Also, most residents of the backcountry were staunch Presbyterians while those whites living in the lowcountry were predominantly Anglicans. The religious difference between the two groups only served to heighten the animosity between them.25 Moreover, most in the backcountry were subsistence farmers, and they did not produce enough surplus crops to be affected by the British taxes.26 The reality was that there were distinct regional differences between the interest of those in the backcountry and the men of lowcountry. The British officials in the south quickly realized that the residents of the backcountry could be potential allies.

26 Edgar, 24.
In May 1775, Josiah Martin, the Royal Governor of North Carolina, reported to Lord Dartmouth, that:

The inhabitants of this country [North Carolina] on the seacoast are for the most part infected with the ill spirit that prevails in the adjacent provinces of Virginia and South Carolina, whose extravagances they are copying by arming men, electing officers and so forth…In the central and western counties they [loyalist] are to be found in great numbers yet steadfast in duty and loyalty, of which their voluntary declarations to me in favor of government that have been signed by 1400 or 1500 men are the best evidence. 27

The previous history of internal conflicts and the presence of longstanding grudges and rivalry between the residents of the lowcountry and the backcountry played a key role in determining which side people took in the conflict. The disdain many held in the backcountry for the Whig lowcountry elites, and also some of their Whig neighbors who had been on the other side of the Regulator Crisis, created a population that was ready to serve the British cause. They came to the loyalists camp, not because they believed in the British political stance, but because they wanted to strike at those who they believed had wronged them previously.

Not only did the residents of the backcountry have grievances with the lowcountry patriots, but so too did the Native Americans and the African slaves. The threat of a slave revolt or Indian uprising had been a troubling reality of life in South Carolina for generations, and both were equally frightening to the lowcountry elite. In a report back to England in July 1775, John Stuart, the British Southern Department Indian agent, wrote, “Nothing can be more alarming to the Carolinians than the idea of an attack from the Indians and Negroes.” 28 The lowcountry elites’ fear of slave insurrection

27 Josiah Martin to the Earl of Dartmouth May 18, 1775, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 9, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 139-140.
stemmed from the Stono Rebellion of 1739, in which lowcountry South Carolina slaves of Kongo-Angolan descent revolted on a massive scale. It was the largest slave rebellion of the eighteenth century in the thirteen British Colonies.\(^{29}\) In his report to Dartmouth, Stuart went on to suggest that the British should use the colonists’ fears to try and restore royal rule to the Carolinas. He believed that just the threat of Indian uprising or slave revolt could be used bring many Carolinians into the loyalist camp.\(^{30}\) In fact, nothing else scared the Carolinians more than the notion of a British incited-Indian attack and a British-backed slave rebellion occurring simultaneously. Henry Laurens also recognized the fear among Carolina Whigs of the potential for a Native American uprising and a massive slave revolt. In a letter to fellow Carolina planter Thomas Fletchall Laurens wrote, “This Colony [South Carolina] is alarmed by threats…of instigated insurrections by our negroes, [and] of inroads by the neighboring tribes of Indians.”\(^{31}\) For generations the Carolinians had been paranoid by the potential for a slave uprising and the possibility that the British might be inciting one, drove the colonist to lash out against their slaves. George Millegen, a loyalist traveling through South Carolina described the crack down on their slaves by writing, “several Negroes were taken up on suspicion and committed to the workhouse where there is a prison for them.”\(^{32}\) Millegen continued with the story of one of the blacks who was arrested, Jeremiah, or Jerry was a freeman, who worked as a fisherman and harbor pilot. He was employed in guiding ships through the treacherous


\(^{32}\) Narrative by George Millegen of his Experiences in South Carolina, September 15, 1775, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 11. ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 110.
channels leading into Charleston harbor and over the dangerous sandbar at the harbor’s entrance. In August 1775, Jerry was arrested and charged with inciting a slave insurrection at the behest of the British.\(^{33}\) Millegen described the charges leveled at Jerry. “He was accused of sending firearms to Negroes in the country and advising them to go into His Majesty’s troops when they arrive, for they were then all to be made free.”\(^{34}\) Despite the charges leveled against him, there was very little proof of his guilt, but this did not deter the Whigs. Jerry was quickly tried and convicted. He was hung on August 18, 1775. Millegen writes of the episode:

> Thus this poor fellow fell a sacrifice to the groundless fears of some and the wicked policy of others, for from the best information I could get his real crime was his being a good pilot and his inclination to be of use to His Majesty’s ships.\(^{35}\)

Henry Laurens had a slightly different take on the incident. On August 20, 1775, he wrote his son John Laurens, “I am now fully satisfied that Jerry was guilty of a design and attempt to encourage our negroes to rebellion and joining the Kings Troops if any had been sent here.”\(^{36}\) Regardless of the actual degree of Jerry’s guilt, this episode suggests the level of the lowcountry Whigs’ fears of slave insurrection and the lengths to which they were willing to go to prevent it. The lowcountry Whigs were keenly aware of the threat posed by the African slave majority in their midst, and sought to make inroads to prevent any sort of slave insurrection in favor of the British or otherwise. They also

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\(^{34}\) Narrative by George Millegen of his Experiences in South Carolina, September 15, 1775, *Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 11*, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 110.


realized that as more and more white men left the lowcountry to serve in the army, the potential for slave revolt increased dramatically. In order to prevent revolt, the lowcountry Whigs decided to leave enough militia in the region to be “ready to march to...any other part where an insurrection may be apprehended.”\(^{37}\) Harsh measures like the Jerry episode, and maintaining a ready militia force in the region, served to deter those slaves who might have had the inclination to do so from actually revolting. The idea that the British would even entertain the idea of using a slave revolt or Indian attack against them prompted many southern colonists who were on the fence to become patriots.\(^{38}\)

The Whig leaders in Charleston quickly recognized the potential for a challenge from within all three disaffected parties. The paranoia of the lowcountry elites led them to deal with the threat from the slaves quickly, with episodes like that of the trial and execution of the free black harbor pilot Jerry. Harsh steps of this nature coupled with the absence of British troops to protect them effectively kept the slaves in line. The Indians had been crushed in the Cherokee War of the late 1760’s and could not wield the power they had previously. In addition, because of their weakness the Indians did not want to start a war, but decided to wait until given instructions to strike from the British. With the threat of these two factions at least, temporarily removed the Council of Safety and the Provincial Congress of South Carolina looked to address the threat of the loyalist. First, they wanted to deal with the loyalists in the lowcountry and then secure neutrality among the loyalists of the backcountry.


\(^{38}\) David K. Wilson, *The Southern Strategy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005)2-5; also see, Buchanan 20-24; also see, Edgar, 36-37; also see Lumpkin, 19-20; also see, Gordon, 21, 25.
The first step the lowcountry Whigs took was to address the possible loyalist threats in their own midst. Anyone suspected of being a loyalist in the lowcountry was either forced to change sides by threat of physical violence or threat of banishment.\(^{39}\) Many lowcountry loyalists were either forced to take a loyalty oath to the Provincial Congress and the Revolution or leave the colony and join the governor aboard the British warships that remained on station in Charleston Harbor. Loyalist George Millegen, was detained and was brought before a committee that consisted of some of the leading lowcountry Whigs, including Charles Pinckney and Arthur Middleton.\(^{40}\) The committee confronted him and asked him to take the following oath:

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\text{I do solemnly swear on the Holy Evangelist of Almighty God that during the present disputes between Great Britain and America I will not directly or indirectly by deed, or word, or writing, attempt to counteract or oppose the proceedings of the people in North America and particularly in this province.}^{41}\]

Mr. Millegen found himself unable to take this oath, and he wrote of the committee’s reaction to his refusal: “Mr. Pinckney asked me if I would take this oath. I told him no and was desired to retire.”\(^{42}\) Mr. Millegen and his family were forced to leave the next morning by boat for the British ships riding at anchor in harbor. Through episodes like this the lowcountry Whigs were able to marshal almost unanimous support for the Revolution around Charleston. By removing the threat of internal conflict from the lowcountry, the Whigs were further able to cement their hold on the province.

Another way that the Whigs secured their power was to remove the last vestiges of British power. One of the most visible examples of this was the seizure of Fort

\(^{39}\) Edgar, 29.
\(^{40}\) Narrative by George Millegen of his Experiences in South Carolina, September 15, 1775, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 11, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 113.
\(^{41}\) Narrative by George Millegen of his Experiences in South Carolina, September 15, 1775, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 11, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 113.
\(^{42}\) Narrative by George Millegen of his Experiences in South Carolina, September 15, 1775, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 11, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 113.
Johnson on September 15, 1775. The fort was the main defensive work guarding the entrance to the harbor in 1775. It stood on James Island by the lower channel into Charleston Harbor, and mounted more than twenty artillery pieces. It had been erected in 1708 during the War of Spanish Succession to protect the harbor and city from French or Spanish invasion. By later summer 1775, it was one of the few military installations in the south still held by forces loyal to the Crown. It stood as a symbol of British defiance and as a direct threat to the colonists’ security because should the British send reinforcements to Governor Campbell, the fort would be a jumping-off point for the invasion of Charleston. In light of the limited numbers of men Campbell had at his disposal, he decided that he could not repel an attempt by the colonists to seize the fort. He decided that instead of letting the fort’s artillery fall into the hands of the rebels, he would destroy the guns, and withdraw the garrison to his ships.

On September 14, 1775, the fort’s defenders and a landing party from the Royal Navy station ship, HMS Tamar, set about destroying the artillery, but they made a major mistake. Instead of spiking the guns, (putting metal spikes into the touch holes of the guns, making them inoperable) they only removed the guns from their firing positions in the defensive works and removed the cannon barrels from the wooden carriages they were placed on. The heavy firing tubes were then they placed on the ground. This did not destroy the guns. All the colonists had to do was simply put the cannon barrels back on the carriages. The British, with the exception of a skeleton force left to make a token defensive, retired to the ships with most of the fort’s gunpowder.

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43 Gordon, 25.
44 Gordon, 25.
The next day Henry Laurens, the President of the Council of Safety, decided to move on the fort. He ordered Colonel William Moultrie to attack the fort. Moultrie called on the elite light infantry and grenadier companies of the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Infantry Regiments.\textsuperscript{45} Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Motte was given command of the attack. The assault was a complete success. The remaining skeleton garrison did not mount a significant resistance. Motte reported:

I have the honor to acquaint you that I took possession of Fort Johnston this morning at the dawn of day without the least opposition. The garrison consists of four men, the gunner and three privates all of which I have made Prisoners and are closely confined.\textsuperscript{46}

The action was a complete success and a major coup for the colonists. By taking the fort, the colonists secured control of the harbor entrance and prevented the British from using the fort as a jumping off point for an attack against the city. In addition to the strategic significance, the capture of Fort Johnson also provided the Carolinians with otherwise unobtainable artillery and other important military supplies. In his report, Motte described the massive amount of military material the American cause gained in the action by writing:

I have found in the magazine about 80 pounds of cannon powder, two powder horns and eight firelocks. The cannon on the barbet battery are all unmounted, say 21, none of them spiked or damaged in the least. The carriages of six or seven are unfit for service. There are for the cannon, 2 sponges, 2 worms, and ladles. I have only two 6 pound cannon mounted in the fort. If the heavy cannon was mounted and well supplied with ammunition, I think I could give a good account of the Man of War. I had almost forgot to mention I have plenty of ball for the heavy cannon.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} Gordon, 26.
The British failure to spike the fort’s cannon ultimately resulted in the Carolinians obtaining workable heavy artillery that they could never have produced on their own. This artillery gave the rebellious colonists the ability to defend the entrance of the harbor and contest any British attempt to try and take the city from the sea. The seizure of Fort Johnson further secured the lowcountry for the Revolution by giving the colonial forces control of heavy artillery and the defensive works that guarded the entrance to Charleston Harbor.

With the Whig control of the lowcountry all but assured by late summer 1775, the Revolutionary leaders in South Carolina set about trying to deal with the loyalists in the backcountry. The Provincial Congress ideally hoped to bring the backcountry men over to their side, but if they were unable to do that they wanted to assure that the peoples of the backcountry would be neutral during the coming war. To this end, the Provincial Congress appointed a delegation to go to the backcountry and negotiate with the loyalist leaders. The most important members of the delegation were leading Whig and lowcountry elite William Henry Drayton and Presbyterian Minister William Tennent. On September 18, 1775, the South Carolina Council of Safety wrote the province’s delegates to the Continental Congress about the mission of this delegation:

This Council judged it expedient to send proper persons to explain to them [backcountry loyalists], the causes and nature of the dispute subsisting between Great Britain and the Colonies to endeavor to reconcile their minds to an union in defence of their commons rights; for those purposes the Honorable Mr. Drayton and the Reverend Mr. Tennent were sent into those parts where the disaffected were most powerful and most numerous.  

This delegation met with limited success in the backcountry, but did achieve a promise of neutrality from some loyalists in a document called the Treaty of Ninety-Six. In the agreement, the loyalists who signed it promised to not to aid the British should they enter the colony in force.\textsuperscript{49} The accomplishments of the delegation were token at best. The majority of the people in the backcountry remained hostile to the Provincial Congress and the Revolution. Backcountry loyalist Thomas Brown reported his assessment of the delegation’s success in a letter to Governor Campbell:

Tenant [Tennent] and Drayton not experiencing that success in their political mission they had flattered themselves with…No endeavors have been wanting on our part to undeceive the people and frustrate the wicked schemes of these political enthusiasts.\textsuperscript{50}

Brown, and many other backcountry men, were far from being neutral. They had chosen to support the British. The failure of Drayton, Tennent, and the other members of the delegation was recognized by October 1775, when the backcountry loyalists went on the offensive. Over the next couple months, the loyalist militias fought Whig forces in the backcountry in small-scale civil war. The fighting began in earnest on November 19, 1775, when a loyalist force attacked the patriot garrison at Ninety-Six. Although the engagement was a draw, the fact that the loyalist attacked outraged the Provincial Congress. It responded quickly by sending a three thousand man army into the backcountry under the command of Colonel Richard Richardson. Richardson’s force hounded the loyalists and by December 1775 had captured most of the Tory leaders. In late December 1775, Richardson reported to Henry Laurens that “We have been successful in disarming most of this unhappy people [backcountry loyalists], they are

\textsuperscript{49} Edgar, 31-32.
\textsuperscript{50} Thomas Brown to Governor Lord William Campbell. October 18, 1775, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 11, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1975) 149.
coming in with fear and trembling, giving up their arms, with a sensible contrition for their errors.”\textsuperscript{51} The final blow to this loyalist uprising was struck on December 22, 1775, when Richardson’s army, then numbering some five thousand men, fell upon the unsuspecting loyalist in their camp near the Reedy River.\textsuperscript{52} Richardson described the action in a report to Laurens:

Our people surrounde[d] their camp by day light in the morning after a long march of 25 miles and lying on their arms till day. They then attacked and took about one hundred and thirty prisoners with baggage arms and ammunition, which completed the conquest.\textsuperscript{53}

The engagement took place during a storm that dropped about thirty inches of snow on the region. The fight was a rout as most of the loyalists were killed or captured. Those who were captured were forced to sign a pledge not to take up arms again, and those who escaped retreated west into the Cherokee territory.\textsuperscript{54} This victory, called the “snow campaign” because of the storm during the pivotal engagement, and the patriot victory in February 1775 at the Battle of Morris Creek Bridge in North Carolina, almost completely removed the threat of the backcountry loyalists. With the threat of the backcountry loyalists removed, the Whigs had effectively addressed all of the internal threats and secured South Carolina for the Revolution for the time being.

Following the fall of Fort Johnson and with things in the backcountry going badly for the loyalists, Governor Lord William Campbell realized he was in danger in


\textsuperscript{52} Edgar, 32-33; also Gordon, 29-32.


\textsuperscript{54} Richard Richardson to Henry Laurens, January 2, 1776, \textit{The Papers of Henry Laurens Vol. 10 December 12, 1774-January 4, 1776}, ed. David R. Chesnutt (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1985) 610-611; also see, Edgar, 32-33, and Gordon, 29-32.
Charleston and decided it was time to withdraw. He closed the British government offices in Charleston, and dissolved the Commons House of Assembly (which had not met in years). Then he abandoned his house on Meeting Street and, being a former naval officer, he and the remaining royal officials in the city, retired to the two Royal Navy station ships in the harbor, HMS Tamar and HMS Cherokee. He personally took up residence on the Tamar.\(^{55}\) Before retiring to the ship and effectively surrendering the colony to the Whigs, Campbell wrote to the Earl of Darnmouth:

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\text{Your Lordship will easily conceive that things are hastening fast to that extremity which will in all probability oblige me to withdraw from Charleston to avoid fresh indignities, and what will make this retreat the more mortifying I shall leave several thousand faithful subjects in the backcountry who are ready to take up arms in defense of the constitution that they had the least support.}^{56}\]

Even as he retreated to the sea and left the capital to the rebels, Campbell indicated to his superiors that he believed their still were many loyalists in the colony, and that all they need was some British support. It was assertions like this that made southern loyalists an integral part of future British plans in the south. Despite Campbell’s bright outlook, the situation in South Carolina for the British was dim. The colony was almost completely under Whig control and the only British military presence in the area was the two small British warships riding at anchor in the harbor. At about the same time Henry Laurens wrote to his son John:

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\text{Lord William is gone aboard the Tamar man of war. The House of Assembly is dissolved. The judges have shut up the courts of law. The Customs House will probably soon follow the example. Fort Johnson is taken into the hands of the people, garrisoned by 400 of the newly raised troops commanded by Col. Motte.}^{57}\]

\(^{55}\) Gordon, 26.  
The contrast is striking. South Carolina was clearly in the hands of the Whigs, and the political power in the colony was now completely in the hand of the lowcountry elites.

In early 1776, the Provincial Congress set about forming a more permanent form of civil government to fill the void created by the end of royal rule. On March 26, 1776, the South Carolina Provincial Congress adopted a new state constitution. South Carolina was the second state to do so. John Rutledge was sworn in as governor of the state the day the constitution was adopted. Henry Laurens then described the new government to his son John:

The Provincial Congress passed on the 26th by which a form of government is established, the Congress metamorphosed in the twinkling of an eye into a General Assembly, from whence a President and Legislative Council and…Officers of State have been chosen by ballot, these will begin to act this very day in their respective spheres and Government will again move in better form and order than we have seen in this colony for many years.58

For the first time since the breakdown of royal rule in 1770-1771, South Carolina had a functioning civil government, but it was far from a true democracy. It was completely dominated by the Rice Kings of the lowcountry elite. Nevertheless, the new constitution was a major step towards independence.

By the spring of 1776, South Carolina was dominated by the lowcountry Whigs. They had defeated or neutralized all of the potential internal threats to their political power and their security, but they still had to face their greatest threat, a British invasion. Since South Carolina was now largely free of internal threats, and now had an efficient civil government, the Whigs could now focus their attention and resources to defeating the impending external threat.

Part III
The Battle of Sullivan’s Island

Just after eleven o’clock on the morning of June 28, 1776, Royal Navy warships opened fire on an unfinished fort constructed of sand and palmetto logs on Sullivan’s Island at the mouth of Charleston Harbor. This artillery barrage was the beginning of a British offensive operation to capture Sullivan’s Island and gain control of the entrance to Charleston Harbor. By nightfall, the British fleet was forced to break off the action and withdraw outside the range of the fort’s artillery. The Carolinian Continental defenders of Sullivan’s Island had withstood a furious bombardment from the ships of the feared Royal Navy and remained in control of the island and thereby the mouth of the harbor. The battle was a complete victory for the Continental forces, and a stunning defeat for the British. The Carolinians’ victory at the Battle of Sullivan’s Island cemented the Rice King’s control of the province and dashed British hopes for a quick victory in the southern colonies. In fact, the results of the battle so shocked British commanders that they refused to conduct operations in the southern colonies for almost two years.

At the time of the outbreak of the American Revolution, Britain had proven itself the dominant military power in the world. During the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), British forces had proven themselves superior to their French antagonist on land, in battles from the Plains of Abraham outside Quebec, Canada, to Cuddalore, India. In 1776, the Royal Navy was the undisputed master of the world oceans, and had demonstrated its dominance in its 1759 victory over the French at the Battle of Quiberon Bay. But most important to understanding the shock of the outcome of the Battle of Sullivan’s Island is that during the Seven Year’s War the British had proven themselves
extraordinarily adept at amphibious siege operations. Time and time again the Royal
Navy, and British Army, successfully captured their enemy’s port cities. From Louisburg
(1758), to Quebec (1759), to Havana (1762), to Manila (1762), British forces had proven
themselves masters of amphibious operations. In 1776, it would seem that a waterbound
port city like Charleston, South Carolina would make an easy target for the British. So,
taking into account the British history of successful amphibious operations, how was it
that British forces were defeated by the Carolinians at Sullivan’s Island? The outcome of
the Battle of Sullivan’s Island is even more of an anomaly when you consider that about
two months later the British forces routed the main Continental Army in a similar type of
operation in New York.

The British defeat at Sullivan’s Island can be attributed to five main factors. First,
by the spring of 1776, the lowcountry elites had seized power and effectively neutralized
most of the internal threats within the province, so they could focus their energy on
defeating the external threat of a British invasion. Second, the British assault on
Sullivan’s Island was not a surprise. Time and again the British suffered from intelligence
leaks and costly delays, all of which allowed the Carolinians time to train and prepare
their defenses. Third, the British underestimated the resolve of the Continental defenders
of Charleston, and thus made a grave error in their plan of attack. Fourth, the British
Commanders, Major General Henry Clinton and Commodore Sir Peter Parker, suffered
from poor intelligence, and a poor knowledge of the local geography, especially of the
local tides and the positions of the harbor’s sandbars. Fifth, the Continental defenders
were blessed with talented leadership. Colonel William Moultrie and Major General
Henry Lee put the defenders of Charleston in a position to effectively challenge the assaulting British force.

**Origins of the Campaign**

For years Royal Governors of North and South Carolina, Lord William Campbell and Josiah Martin, had reported to their superiors in London that the vast majority of the population of the Carolinas was favorable to the cause of the King. As late as the fall of 1775, the Royal Governor of South Carolina, Lord William Campbell, was writing to the Ministry in London, explaining that the rebellion in southern provinces could be ended quickly with a relatively small military force. On October 19, 1775, Governor Campbell wrote the Earl of Dartmouth:

> I must beg leave to add that three regiments, a proper detachment of artillery, with a couple of good frigates, some small craft, and a bomb-ketch, would do the whole business effectually here and go a great way to reduce Georgia and North Carolina to a sense of their duty. Charleston is the fountainhead from whence all the violence flows. Stop that, and the rebellion in this part of the continent will I trust soon be over.\(^59\)

Campbell knew the Whig center of power in the Carolinas was Charleston and thought that by taking it he could quell the rebellion there. He believed that with the fall of Charleston and a small show of force by the British military, the vast majority of Carolinians, especially in the backcountry, would be, if not already loyalist, inclined to become loyalist and rise in support of the King's troops.\(^60\) The pleas of Campbell and Martin convinced the ministry, especially the Earl of Dartmouth, that a small expedition to the southern colonies was a good idea. On October 22, 1775, Dartmouth wrote Major General William Howe, “There is good ground to believe that the appearance of a


respectable force to the southward under the command of an able and discreet officer will have the effect to restore order and government in those four provinces.” Thus, in early 1776, General Howe, under orders from London, ordered Major General Henry Clinton southward with a small force from Boston. Clinton was ordered to rendezvous off the mouth of the Cape Fear River in North Carolina with another force, under the command of Commodore Sir Peter Parker and Lord Charles Cornwallis, coming from Cork, Ireland. The fleet sailing from Ireland was much larger then Clinton’s force: it contained the warships of Parker’s Squadron, and transports carrying seven regiments of infantry. Clinton left Boston for the South on January 20, 1776.62

Major General Henry Clinton and his small force arrived off Cape Fear on March 12, 1776. Although the capture of Charleston, South Carolina, was the primary mission of this force, Josiah Martin had convinced British officials that a small, brief show of force by Clinton’s command could inspire the North Carolinian loyalists to rise and reclaim the province for the King. Upon arriving at Cape Fear, Clinton was informed that the loyalist force that was supposed to meet him had been destroyed in battle with rebels about two weeks before his arrival.63

The North Carolina loyalist forces in the interior had begun a march to link up with Clinton’s force on the coast on February 20, 1776. This force of some 1,600 consisted mainly of transplanted Scottish highlanders who had a strong allegiance to the King. On February 27, the loyalists met a strong Whig force of about 1,000 men at the Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge. Although the loyalists had a numerical advantage, it was

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63 Buchanan, 5.
offset by the fact that they had only some 500 firearms while all of the Whigs were armed with muskets. Moore’s Creek was about fifty feet wide. The rebels took a defensive posture, and entrenched themselves on one side of the bridge across the creek, forcing the loyalists to attack. Led by the highlanders, the loyalists charged the over the bridge at the Whigs. The results of the charge were disastrous. The loyalists were cut down by withering rebel fire. After the checking loyalist advance the rebels charged their broken enemy and captured about 850 prisoners. The Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge destroyed the loyalists’ force and prevented it from linking up with Clinton. The defeat was so shattering that it ended any hope of raising a loyalist army in North Carolina.64

The defeat of the North Carolina loyalists at Moore’s Creek Bridge was the first in a series of setbacks for Clinton’s southern expedition. After his arrival off Cape Fear on March 12, 1776, Clinton was forced to wait for the arrival of Cornwallis and Parker with the main force of the expedition. Cornwallis and Parker were supposed to leave Cork in December 1775, but their departure was delayed for more than a month and they did not actually weigh anchor until February 13, 1776. The convoy was further delayed by series of heavy storms in the Atlantic. The storms scattered the British convoy. Some of the ships of the convoy were forced to return to Cork. The rest of the ships limped to Cape Fear one by one. The first ship of Parker’s fleet arrived on April 18, and the last ship finally made it on May 31. The total British force riding at anchor at Cape Fear numbered some fifty ships, including numerous transports and warships.65

64 Buchanan, 3-5; also see, Henry Lumpkin, From Savannah to Yorktown (New York, to-Excel Press, 1987) 4-6.
65 Buchanan, 5; also see, David K. Wilson, The Southern Strategy (Columbia, The University of South Carolina Press, 2005) 36-37.
These delays setback Clinton’s original timetable to the point where he and his other senior officers questioned where it would be prudent to abandon the expedition and sail north with his force to join General Howe in the pending invasion of New York. To further complicate matters, Clinton was receiving pressure for Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, to bring his force into the Chesapeake, and Governor Campbell was still insisting that Charleston could be easily taken. Clinton’s decision became clear when he received intelligence from a small force he and Parker had dispatched to reconnoiter the approaches to Charleston Harbor. They reported that the Continental fortifications on Sullivan’s Island were incomplete and venerable. Upon hearing this news, Peter Parker advocated that they move on Sullivan’s Island immediately and Clinton agreed. Despite their decision to attack Sullivan’s Island, the two British officers knew that the delay had cost them valuable time. It was too late in the year for an all-out offensive against Charleston because hurricane season was less than a month away. From the start, their sole objective was to capture Sullivan’s Island and hold it as a refuge for local loyalists and as a jumping off point for future operations against Charleston. The artillery in the Continental fort on Sullivan’s Island dominated the main ship channel and the northern entrance into Charleston harbor. Whoever controlled the fort effectively controlled who entered the harbor. General Clinton explained his decision to attack Sullivan’s Island in his report to Lord George Germain:

Having received some intelligence at that time that the works erected by the rebels on Sullivan’s Island (The key to Charleston Harbor) were in an imperfect and unfinished state, I was induced to acquiesce in a proposal made to me by the commodore to attempt the reduction of that fortress by a coup de main. I thought it possible at the same time that it might be followed by such immediate consequences as would prove of great advantage to His Majesty’s service; I say

66 Buchanan, 5; also see, Wilson, 37-39.
67 Buchanan, 6; also see, Lumpkin, 10-11.
immediate, my lord, for it never was my intention at this season of the year to have proceeded farther then Sullivan’s Island… 68

The British fleet under Clinton and Parker set sail from Cape Fear on May 31, 1776. They were spotted a day later off the approaches to Charleston. The reality of the situation is that even if the British would have captured Sullivan’s Island, it would have proven to little or no advantage for them. The British defenders of the island would be cut off, much the same way the Federal defenders of Fort Sumter were some eighty-five years later. Any British force lodged on Sullivan’s Island would only be able to receive supplies by sea, and would have been surrounded by a countryside that was notorious Whig. Furthermore, the sandy island did not have the provisions to house large numbers of loyalist refugees. 69 So, as John Buchanan put it, “The operation was a ridiculous misuse of resources based on a flawed concept.” 70

Charleston Harbor and Its Defenses

The arrival of the British fleet off the coast of Charleston on June 1, 1776 was hardly a surprise to the city’s inhabitants. As early as January, the Continental Congress sent word to Charleston’s defenders that they were the likely target of a British attack. 71 On March 26, 1776, Henry Laurens wrote in a letter to his son John that, “We are now daily in expectation of a visit from General Clinton, Lord Cornwallis or some body else with a friendly suit of 40 guns ships and six or eight battalions.” 72 The defenders of Charleston even knew who would be in command of the British expedition, and had an idea of what the size and composition of the British force would be. The Continental

69 Buchanan, 6; also see, Wilson, 39-40.
70 Buchanan, 6.
71 Wilson, 43.
forces defending Charleston had more then five months to prepare their defenses for the British attack.

The city of Charleston lies on the tip of a peninsula that is bound to the north by the Cooper River and to the south by the Ashley River. Beyond the tip of the peninsula, at the confluence of the two rivers, was Charleston Harbor. The harbor was notoriously difficult to navigate. Then as now, the harbor has numerous sandbars and hidden shallows. The mouth of the harbor was protected by two barrier islands, James Island to the south and Sullivan’s Island to the north. North of Sullivan’s Island there is a shallow inlet not more then seventy five yards wide, known as the Breach. On the other side of the Breach, to the north of Sullivan’s Island was another barrier island known then as the Long Island (now known as the Isle of Palms).\(^{73}\) Beyond the mouth of the harbor was the notorious Charleston sandbar. Heavy ships, like the British warships, could only pass over the bar during high tide, and they had to pass through the bar in one of five specific channels. Warships with more then forty guns had to be lightened to have a shallow enough draft to pass through one of the channels of the bar.\(^{74}\) The other important geographic feature of Charleston Harbor was a large sandbar in the center of the channel between James Island and Sullivan’s Island. This sandbar was known as the “Middle Ground” and later became the foundation for the construction of Fort Sumter (in fact it can easily still be seen at low tide). After successfully navigating the Charleston sandbar, ships trying to enter the harbor had to pass though one of two channels. The first was the southern entrance or lower channel, and was between James Island and the “Middle Ground”; the other was the northern entrance or upper channel, which was between the

\(^{73}\) Lumpkin, 12, also see; Wilson, 43-45.

\(^{74}\) Buchanan, 11-12.
“Middle Ground” and Sullivan’s Island. The lower channel to the harbor was much shallower than the northern entrance, so the majority of the heavy shipping passed through that upper channel. The northern channel between the “Middle Ground” and the southern tip of Sullivan’s Island was also called Rebellion Road and was the main ship channel into the harbor.

In June 1776, the entrance to Charleston Harbor was guarded by two main fortifications. Fort Johnson, on James Island, and a new fort on the southern tip of Sullivan’s Island, that had no official name but was commonly referred to as Fort Sullivan. Fort Johnson was on the northern tip of James Island and, for decades had been the harbor’s main outer defense work. It had been erected in 1708 during the War of Spanish Succession to protect the harbor and city from French or Spanish invasion. Fort Johnson was captured the previous year by Continental forces and continued to stand as the harbor’s main outer defense work until the Continentals decided to strengthen the harbor defenses by building a new fort on the southern tip of Sullivan’s Island. Fort Johnson adequately guarded the southern entrance to the harbor and, by building a new fort on Sullivan’s Island, the Continentals could also effectively guard the northern entrance. Artillery in a fort on the southern tip of Sullivan’s Island would dominate Rebellion Roads, the main ship channel into Charleston Harbor.

At the time of the British arrival off Charleston, the new fort on Sullivan’s Island was only half completed. The plans for the new fort were immense. In part, the sheer scale of the construction project prolonged the building process. The layout of this new fort was very conventional for the period. It was square with four bastions jutting out of

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75 Buchanan, 14; also see, Lumpkin, 12, and Wilson, 49.
76 Gordon, 25.
each corner. It was designed to have a compliment of a thousand men and mount more then 30 pieces of heavy artillery. By June 1776, only the eastern wall, facing the ocean and the southern wall, facing the ship channel, were completed. The other two walls including the western wall, which faced the cove behind the island were incomplete and less then seven feet tall at the time. If British ships could get through the ship channel and into the cove behind the island, they could fire on the incomplete western wall of the fort and drive the Continental defenders from their works.

Even though two of the fort’s four walls were incomplete, at the time of the attack it was still a formidable defensive work. Those sections that were complete mounted some thirty-one pieces of heavy artillery. These cannon were a mix of British eighteen pound guns and captured French twenty-six pound guns from the Seven Years’ War. In addition to the fort’s formidable armament, the materials used in the construction also proved to be an advantage to the Carolinian defenders. The fort was constructed of sand and local palmetto logs. The walls were constructed by building four double walls of palmetto logs placed sixteen feet apart that were dovetailed and bolted. The space between the two palmetto walls was filled up with sand and marsh clay to form the reinforced outer walls of the fort. John Buchanan described importance of the fort’s palmetto log construction by writing:

Had the walls been made of pine or hardwoods they would have been destroyed and the flying splinters turned into lethal weapons against the defenders. But palmetto wood does not splinter. It is soft, spongy, and [in the battle] British cannon balls sank into the porous wood as they did into the sand.

77 Wilson, 43.
78 Buchanan, 7.
79 Gordon, 42.
80 Buchanan, 14; also see, Lumpkin, 12-13.
81 Buchanan, 14.
The palmetto’s spongy nature and the fort’s construction in general were a major fact in the American victory. The fort’s construction was the major reason why the Continental defenders were able to fend off the heavy guns of the Royal Navy. In fact, during the battle, British cannonballs bounced off the fort’s palmetto walls.\footnote{82 Walter Edgar, \textit{Partisans and Redcoats} (New York: Harperscollins Publishers, 2001) 35; also see, Wilson, 43; and Gordon, 41-42.}

**The Continental Defenders**

Major General Charles Lee was in command of the 6,500 American Whigs who had gathered to defend Charleston.\footnote{83 Buchanan, 13; also see, Lumpkin, 12.} Charles Lee was born in England in 1731. He was an ex-British army officer with a radical Whig ideology. He had offered his services to the Continental Congress once the war had broken out. Lee thought himself the most capable military officer in the Continental Army. Although unquestionably brave and energetic, Lee was also obnoxious, abrasive, and arrogant. He looked down on much of the American officer corps, and resented the fact that Congress had seen fit to promote other officers, like George Washington, above him. In the spring of 1776, Congress appointed him to command the Southern Department of the Continental Army. This department was charged with the defense of the colonies of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.\footnote{84 Buchanan, 8. Wilson, 41-42.} Upon arrival in Charleston, General Lee almost immediately began to criticize the Carolinian defenders and their defensive works. Lee brutally criticized the Carolinians’ defensive engineering and their abilities as soldiers. After the battle, Lee expressed his feelings about his men prior to the battle, by writing, “I confess I was in pain from the little confidence I reposed in our troops—the officers all
boys and the men raw recruits.”85 Furthermore, Lee even insisted right up to the day of
the battle that the fort on Sullivan’s Island was indefensible and should be abandoned.
Henry Laurens commented to his John about Lee’s impression of the fort. He wrote
“General Lee at first sight was exceedingly displeased with the fort at Sullivan’s [Island
and] wished we could save our stores and abandon it.”86 Lee considered the fort’s
engineering to be shoddy, and he thought the fort’s position left it exposed to being cut
from the mainland.

The fort was only held because Colonel William Moultrie refused to quit it when
ordered to by Lee. Moultrie refused to quit the fort because the Governor of South
Carolina, John Rutledge, insisted it be defended.87 The truth is that strictly speaking Lee
was probably right. It was a sound military move to abandon the fort. But his abrasive
attitude drove a wedge between him and the Carolinians. Lee so annoyed the Carolinians
that although Rutledge had given a public order that all South Carolina forces were to
obey Lee’s orders, he gave William Moultrie a secret order to only follow Lee’s orders so
long as they were in a accordance with his own.88 To ease his mind, Lee ordered a boat
bridge built to connect Sullivan’s Island to Haddrell’s Point on the mainland. In theory,
the bridge would allow the Continental defenders an avenue of retreat should they be
dislodged from their works on the island, but the bridge was not completed by the time of

85 Major General Charles Lee to General George Washington, July 1, 1776. The Papers of George
Washington Vol.5 June-August 1776 ed. W.W. Abbot, and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville, University of
86 Henry Laurens to John Laurens, August 14, 1776. The Papers of Henry Laurens Vol. 11 January 5, 1776-
88Lumpkin, 13-14; also see, Wilson, 44-45.
the British attack.\textsuperscript{89} Despite his personal conflict with the Carolinian leadership on how to best defend Charleston, and his blunt criticism of the southern troops, General Lee played an important part in the training and preparation of the Continental defenders of Sullivan’s Island.

The southern officers and soldiers had very little military experience or military training. General Lee trained and drilled Charleston’s defenders in the weeks leading up to the Battle of Sullivan’s Island. Even William Moultrie admitted that Lee played a valuable role in training and disciplining his troops to stand in the face of withering enemy artillery fire and fight like professional soldiers.\textsuperscript{90} On the day of the assault, Lee was not on Sullivan’s Island but preparing defenses in the city of Charleston. The Continental forces in the city of Charleston consisted of the city’s militia (about 700 men), and militia units from the surrounding countryside (1,972 men). The Continental units in the city included, the 3\textsuperscript{rd} North Carolina Regiment (397 men), and the main elements of the 4\textsuperscript{th} South Carolina Artillery Regiment (200 men). The rest of General Lee’s command was split between Fort Johnson on James Island and at Haddrell’s Point in support of the forces on Sullivan’s Island. The Continental garrison of Fort Johnson under Colonel Christopher Gadsden consisted of the 1\textsuperscript{st} South Carolina Regiment of Foot (440 men) and about thirty-two heavy artillery pieces ranging from eighteen pound guns to twenty-six pound guns. The Continental Brigade on Haddrell’s Point was under the direct command of Brigadier General James Armstrong. His force consisted of Colonel Isaac Huger’s 5\textsuperscript{th} South Carolina Rifle Regiment (268 men), Colonel Thomas Sumter’s

\textsuperscript{89} Major General Charles Lee to General George Washington, July 1, 1776. The Papers of George Washington Vol.5 June-August 1776 ed. W.W. Abbot, and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1993) 169; also see, Lumpkin, 13, and, Wilson, 38, 45.

\textsuperscript{90} Wilson, 46-47.
6th South Carolina Rifle Regiment (160 men), the main element of Colonel Francis Nash’s 1st North Carolina Regiment of Foot (221 men), Colonel Alexander Martin’s 2nd North Carolina Regiment of Foot (345 men), and Colonel Peter Muhlenberg’s 8th Virginia Regiment (535 men). Armstrong’s command of more then fifteen hundred men was the largest concentration of Continental troops around Charleston. 91

The commander of the Continental forces on Sullivan’s Island was Colonel William Moultrie. Moultrie was born in Charleston in 1730. He served with distinction in the Cherokee Wars of the 1760s. He was a member of the lowcountry gentry. He owned a plantation in St. John’s Berkeley, South Carolina, and had married into one of the most powerful families in colony. His brother, John Moultrie, was the Lieutenant Governor of the British colony of East Florida and a staunch loyalist. Politically, William Moultrie was moderate, but when the time came to choose sides he accepted a commission as the Colonel of the 2nd South Carolina Regiment. His experience fighting Indians made him very cool and collected when under fire, a quality which served him well on the ramparts of the fort which would later bear his name. 92 Throughout the Battle of Sullivan’s Island, Moultrie inspired his inexperienced men with his own personal bravery and directed a well-aimed artillery fire at the British fleet. On the day of the battle, Moultrie was the senior Continental officer on Sullivan’s Island. His command consisted of two main elements, the garrison of the fort itself on the southern end of the island, and a detachment sent to the northern tip of the island to oppose a possible British attempt to cross the Breach Inlet and land there. During the battle, Moultrie personally commanded the defense of the fort. His garrison consisted of his own 2nd South Carolina Regiment

91 Lumpkin, 12-13; also see, Wilson, 56-57.  
92 Buchanan, 7.
(413 men) and a detachment of the 4th South Carolina Artillery (22 men). The fort
mounted thirty-one pieces of heavy artillery ranging from nine pound guns to twenty-six
pound guns.93

Theoretically, the force guarding the northern tip of Sullivan’s Island were under
Moultrie’s command, but when the British artillery barrage began, they were cut off from
his direct supervision and acted independently. Lieutenant Colonel William Thompson
was in direct command of the force guarding the northern tip of Sullivan’s Island. His
force consisted of his own 3rd South Carolina Rifle Regiment (about 300 men), a
detachment of the 1st North Carolina Regiment (about 200 men) and more than 200
hundred members of the South Carolina Militia. Thompson’s total force was about 780
men. Thompson’s own 3rd South Carolina Rifle Regiment was made largely of riflemen
from the backcountry. They built rifle pits, breastworks, and a small redoubt out of sand
and palmetto logs on the northern end of the island. Lee placed Thompson’s force 500
yards from the water’s edge of the Breach. This was important because while in that
position his troops were out of the range of any British field artillery on the Long Island,
but able to directly oppose any British landing with their own artillery. Thompson’s force
was supported by three pieces of artillery, a pair of six pound field guns, and a heavy
eighteen pound gun.94

93 The South Carolina Gazette enclosed in letter from Henry Laurens to John Laurens, August 14, 1776.
The Papers of Henry Laurens Vol. 11 January 5, 1776- November 1, 1777, ed. David R. Chesnutt
(Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1988) 237-243; also see, The South Carolina Gazette,
August 2, 1776, reprinted in The Pennsylvania Gazette, September 11, 1776, Accessible Achieves, online,
www.accessible.com, October 24, 2005; also see, Buchanan, 12-13, and, Wilson, 56-57.
94 The South Carolina Gazette enclosed in letter from Henry Laurens to John Laurens, August 14, 1776.
The Papers of Henry Laurens Vol. 11 January 5, 1776- November 1, 1777, ed. David R. Chesnutt
(Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1988) 237-243; also see, The South Carolina Gazette,
August 2, 1776, reprinted in The Pennsylvania Gazette, September 11, 1776, Accessible Achieves, online,
www.accessible.com, October 24, 2005; also see: Lieutenant General Henry Clinton to Lord George
The British Force

The commander of the British offensive, Major General Henry Clinton, would go on to play a major role in the American War for Independence. He was a career military officer, and had served with distinction in the Seven Years’ War, rising to the rank of colonel. He had arrived in Boston just in time to witness the murderous assault on Breed’s Hill on June 16, 1776. He was described as aggressive and arrogant, and had a reputation in the army for being quarrelsome and difficult. Nevertheless, he was an extremely competent officer and eventually was knighted and appointed the commander and chief of His Majesty’s forces in North America in 1778. Clinton’s second in command was the extremely capable Lord Charles Cornwallis. Cornwallis was of noble birth and, like Clinton, had served with distinction in the previous war. He, too, had risen to the rank of colonel in that conflict. The Battle of Sullivan’s Island was Cornwallis’ first action in North America. He had come reluctantly, only by the personal request of the sovereign. At the battle, the British land forces consisted of six regular infantry regiments, including the 15th Regiment of Foot, 33rd Regiment of Foot, 37th Regiment of Foot, the 42nd Regiment of Foot, 54th Regiment of Foot and the 57th Regiment of Foot, totaling about 2,200 troops. Clinton was reinforced by a large detachment of Marines from the fleet that numbered about 700. The total British land force at the Battle of Sullivan’s Island was about 2,900 troops.

Eight Royal Navy Warships and a bomb vessel took part in the bombardment of Fort Sullivan. The most formidable ships in Commodore Sir Peter Parker’s squadron


95 Wilson, 56-57.
96 Wilson, 56-58.
were the heavy frigates *Bristol* and *Experiment*. Both of these ships were rated as fifty
gun ships. The *Bristol* was Parker’s flagship. There were also four twenty-eight gun light
frigates in the fleet, including the *Active*, the *Solebay*, the *Acteon*, and the *Syren*. The
*Friendship* and *Sphinx* were the lightest warships in the British naval force mounting
twenty-two and twenty guns respectively. In fact, the *Friendship* had recently been
converted from a transport to a light warship. The *Thunder* was the fleet’s bomb ship.\(^97\) It
was specially designed to carry two siege mortars. The mortars could fire explosive
shells, sometimes called bombs, on high arc trajectories over the fort’s walls where they
could do serious damage. In contrast, because they were designed to batter opposing
warships, regular naval artillery fired solid shells on flat trajectories. In total, these ships
combined mounted some 260 pieces of artillery, and all nine of these ships were
deployed in the bombardment of the fort on Sullivan’s Island.\(^98\)

**The British Plan of Attack**

Although the British arrived off the Charleston coast on June 1, 1776, unfavorable
winds and Charleston’s treacherous outer sandbar prevented most of the British fleet
from entering the harbor for more then a week.\(^99\) While the navy was working on getting
the fleet over the bar, Generals Clinton and Cornwallis were aboard a small sloop making
a careful reconnaissance of the American defenses on Sullivan’s Island. Originally, they

\(^97\) “Commodore Sir Peter Parker report to The Lords of the Admiralty” July 9, 1776, *Documents of the
also see, *The South Carolina Gazette* enclosed in letter from Henry Laurens to John Laurens, August 14,
1776, *The Papers of Henry Laurens* Vol. 11 January 5, 1776-November 1, 1777, ed. David R. Chesnutt
(Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1988) 237-243; also see, *The South Carolina Gazette*,
August 2, 1776, reprinted in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 11, 1776, Accessible Achieves, online,
www.accessible.com, October 24, 2005; also see; Buchanan, 12-14.

\(^98\) Wilson, 47-49.

\(^99\) Commodore Sir Peter Parker report to The Lords of the Admiralty, July 9, 1776, *Documents of the
American Revolution 1770-1783* Vol. 12, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1976) 168; also
see, Buchanan, 7, 12-13.
had intended to make a direct amphibious assault, what Clinton had described as a “coup de main” on Sullivan’s Island. However, after seeing the harbor’s rough currents and the American defenses, the two generals decided that any opposed landing on Sullivan’s Island had the potential to be a disaster. Instead, they decided to land their main force on the barrier island directly to the north of Sullivan’s Island, then called the Long Island, and today known as the Isle of Palms. The two islands were separated by a narrow channel known as the Breach. Clinton’s plan was to land on the Long Island and while the guns of the fleet occupied the fort on the southern end of Sullivan’s Island, his land force would cross the Breach onto Sullivan’s Island and drive down the island from the north to the south. Clinton received intelligence that Breach was easily fordable at low tide. He believed the Breach was only eighteen inches deep at low tide, and developed this plan under the assumption that his troops could march across the channel. 100 Clinton explained the decision he and Cornwallis made in his report to Lord George Germain by writing:

Upon weighing every circumstance, Lord Cornwallis agreed with me in the opinion that we could not more effectually cooperate with the intended movements of the fleet than by taking possession of Long Island, which was represented to communicate with Sullivan’s Island by a ford passable at low water. 101

On June 9, 1776, the British began landing troops on the Long Island. The British plan was simple. Parker’s fleet would occupy the island’s defenders by heavily bombarding the fort while Clinton and the land force would ford the Breach, land on the northern part

of the island, and drive southward to the fort, trapping the Continental defenders between
the guns of the fleet and the bayonets of the British regulars.\textsuperscript{102}

**Clinton’s Plan Begins to Fall Apart**

By June 18, Clinton’s whole land force had disembarked from the transport ships.

Almost as soon as Clinton’s army began to collect itself on the Long Island, things began
to go wrong. This landing on the Long Island made it very clear to the Continentals that
Sullivan’s Island was the main British objective. By landing on the Long Island, the
British lost one of their greatest advantages, the element of surprise. Once General
Charles Lee knew that Sullivan’s Island was the British target, he was able to more
effectively prepare his defenses and deploy his forces. He immediately dispatched
William Thompson and a force of 780 men to guard the northern tip of Sullivan’s island
with orders to oppose any British landing there.\textsuperscript{103}

To make matters worst, British reconnaissance parties were unable to locate the
ford across the Breach that their intelligence told them existed. That ford was an integral
part of Clinton’s plan for the capture of Sullivan’s Island. Clinton explained the
predicament in his report to Germain. Clinton wrote:

> It became naturally our first business to ascertain the ford and its situation, but to
our unspeakable mortification the channel, which for some time before was
reported to have been only 18 inches deep at low water, was now found to be 7
feet, a circumstance we are told not uncommon on this sandy coast. By this
discovery your lordship will perceive that our operations from the Long Island
were rendered limited and confined.\textsuperscript{104}

Without a ford, Clinton had to rethink his plan. Clinton did have flatboats at his disposal
so he could still cross the Breach, but only in limited numbers. As he put it, “I had not

\textsuperscript{102} Wilson, 46.
\textsuperscript{103} Wilson, 46.
boats for above six or seven hundred men,”\textsuperscript{105} Despite not finding a ford, the situation still initially seemed advantageous to the British. Thompson originally had placed his force on the extreme northern tip of Sullivan’s Island, right on the water’s edge of the Breach. This disposition could not be more favorable to the British. Clinton and Cornwallis now planned to shell Thompson’s position with their field artillery from the Long Island and drive them from the water’s edge. According to this new plan, once the American’s withdrew from the water’s edge, Clinton would order the British troops to cross the Breach in flatboats and land on Sullivan’s Island.\textsuperscript{106}

Just as the British were preparing to execute this new plan, the Continental commander, and really the only professional soldier in the Southern Department of the Continental Army, General Charles Lee, made a timely inspection tour of Colonel Thompson’s defenses. Lee quickly recognized weakness of Thompson’s position and saw that Thompson’s works were well within the range of British field artillery. Lee immediately ordered Thompson to abandon and destroy his original works, to pull back 500 yards to the rear, and to build new defensive works there. In this new position, Thompson’s men were now beyond the range of British artillery, but still able to oppose any British attempt to cross the Breach with their own artillery. This was an ingenious move on the part of Charles Lee. Any British attempt to cross the Breach now would


have to be made without artillery support from the Long Island.\textsuperscript{107} Clinton wrote of this situation:

At this time, though the rebels had an entrenchment and battery on that point of the island on which I intended a landing, I thought such a disposition might be made with the light ordnance I had on shore as would dislodge them and cover the landing of the troops; but...they removed from this station and took up some very strong ground five hundred yards back in a much more extended front than the narrow spit of sand on which they had first placed themselves.\textsuperscript{108}

By this new disposition of Thompson’s force, Lee had effectively neutralized the British Army on the Long Island. Both Clinton and Cornwallis were unwilling to risk a landing in the face of Thompson’s artillery and dug in riflemen. They believed that if they tried to force their way across the Breach and land on Sullivan’s Island, their losses would be unacceptable and there was no guarantee that they would be able to dislodge Thompson’s force. So by a simple troop disposition, Charles Lee effectively paralyzed Clinton’s British land force, and basically transformed the battle into an artillery duel between Moultrie’s fort and Parker’s fleet. By moving Thompson’s troops, Lee prevented the British Army from playing any significant role in the Battle of Sullivan’s Island.\textsuperscript{109} Thus, when the British fleet did attack on June 28, 1776, there was little that Clinton’s force could do in support.

**Parker’s Plan for Victory**

While General Clinton was trying to figure out how to get his men across the Breach, Commodore Sir Peter Parker was preparing his squadron for their attack on the semi-completed American fort on the southern end of Sullivan’s Island. Parker was not

\textsuperscript{107} Lieutenant General Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain, July 8, 1776. _Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 12_, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1976) 163-164; also see Wilson, 46.


\textsuperscript{109} Wilson, 46-47.
gravely concerned with Clinton’s predicament on the Long Island because he believed that the guns of his squadron could easily force the Continentals to abandon the fort, regardless of whether or not Clinton landed on the northern end of the island. Parker assumed he could take the fort without the help of the army. He had very little respect for his American opponents and his battle plan shows it. He planned to anchor his ships as close as possible to the American fort and then pummel the fort into submission. Once British guns silenced the fort, he planned to take it by deploying landing parties comprised of seamen and marines.\(^{110}\)

Parker originally wanted to make his attack on the fort on June 24, but the attack had to be cancelled because of unfavorable winds. The delay allowed the second British heavy frigate the *Experiment* to make it over the outer sandbar so it could participate in the battle. Four days later, on June 28, 1776, Commodore Parker finally got a favorable wind and, at about ten thirty that day, he gave the signal for the fleet to weigh anchor and prepare to engage the rebel fort on Sullivan’s Island.

Parker hurled nine warships against the fort that morning. He divided his squadron into three divisions each with a different objective. The first division was comprised of Parker’s flagship the *Bristol*, the *Experiment*, the *Active*, and the *Solebay*. The *Bristol* and the *Experiment* were the heaviest ships under Parker’s command. Both were heavy frigates and rated as fifty gun ships. The *Active* and the *Solebay*, were both light frigates and were rated as twenty-eight gun ships. The first division’s mission was to enter the main ship channel and anchor as close as possible to the fort’s southern wall. Once in position, they were to open fire on the fortress, and bombard the southern wall. The second division consisted of the bomb ship *Thunder* and her escort the *Friendship*.

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\(^{110}\) Wilson, 47.
Their mission was to close to within mortar range of the eastern wall and then have *Thunder* open fire on the fort with explosive shells. The twenty-two gun *Friendship* was assigned to protect the vulnerable bomb ship in her approach to the fort. The third division consisted of three twenty-eight gun frigates, the *Actaeon*, the *Syren*, and the *Sphynx*. Their mission was to go through the main ship channel and move into the cove between Sullivan’s Island and the mainland. They had the important job of moving around to the rear of the fort and bombarding the fort’s incomplete western wall. 111 In his report, Parker explained the third division’s mission by writing, “The *Sphynx, Actaeon* and *Syren* were to have been to the westward…to enfilade the works, and when the rebels were driven from them to cut off their retreat if possible.”112 The mission of the third division was to outflank the fort. Parker essentially created a trap. He planned for the first and second division to drive the rebels from the fort into the waiting guns of the third division. Unfortunately for the British, Parker’s plan began to unravel almost immediately once the firing began.

The Battle of Sullivan’s Island

Early on the morning of June 28, 1776, Colonel Moultrie had decided to ride out to inspect Thompson’s positions on the northern end of the island. Later that morning Moultrie glanced to the south and saw something very much to his surprise, the British ships moving towards the fort under full sail. He ordered Thompson to hold his position for as long as possible if attacked and then rode at a full gallop back to the fort. Upon his arrival, he ordered the garrison to man their posts. The fort’s defenders were primarily

111 Commodore Sir Peter Parker report to The Lords of the Admiralty, July 9, 1776, *Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 12*, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1976) 168-169; also see, Wilson, 47.
members of Moultrie’s own 2nd South Carolina Regiment. The 2nd South Carolina was one of the finest units in the American Army in the summer of 1776. Unlike the rabble of men collecting to defend New York that summer, the 2nd South Carolina was sharply uniformed, and included members of some of the finest families in the lowcountry. They wore blue uniform coats with red facings and had black caps with the crescent moon of South Carolina emblem affixed on the front. In addition to the 2nd South Carolina Regiment, there were twenty-two members of the 4th South Carolina Artillery assigned to the garrison to man the fort’s heavy guns. Morale among the members of the garrison was very high that June morning. They had been waiting for the opportunity to fight the British for months. That morning they scrambled up to the ramparts and bastions to man the fort’s artillery with great enthusiasm. The men of the 2nd South Carolina were trained to fight as both as infantrymen with their small arms and as artillerists. During the battle, they helped the detachment of the 4th South Carolina artillery man the fort’s main batteries of eighteen and twenty-six pound guns on the southern and eastern walls of the fort.\footnote{113} 

At eleven in the morning on June 28, shells from the British bomb ship Thunder began falling on the fort. Thunder’s salvos were covering fire for Parker’s first division which closed to within range of the fort’s southern wall. The four ships of the first division sailed in a traditional Royal Navy line of battle to between three hundred and fifty and four hundred yards of the fort’s southern wall and dropped anchor. By a quarter past eleven, the ships of Parker’s first division were in place. Once in position, the two fifty gun heavy frigates, Bristol and Experiment, and the two twenty-eight gun light

\footnote{113} Marko Zlatich, General Washington’s Army 1: 1775-1778 (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1994) 10-11, 27, 45; also see; Wilson, 48-49.
frigates opened fire on the fort. The four ships fired broadside after broadside at the southern wall of the fort. But, much to the distress of the British, the hundreds of shells that were fired made little to no impression on the fort’s walls. The palmetto log and earthen construction of the walls absorbed and deflected the British cannon balls. The American gunners concentrated their fire on Parker’s two heavy frigates. They poured round after round into the wooden hulls of the British warships. Fire from the fort crippled British rigging and raked the upper decks of the British ships.\textsuperscript{114}

Early in the bombardment, the bomb ship \textit{Thunder} fired several effective salvos over the walls of the fort, but after firing only about twenty volleys, her two mortars broke out of their beds because of excess recoil which was caused by the guns being overcharged with gunpowder. Once the mortars broke out of their beds, they became inoperable for the remainder of the engagement. \textit{Thunder} was intentionally anchored out of the range of the guns of the fort. The idea was that \textit{Thunder} could stand off and lob explosive mortar shells into the fort without being harassed by American fire. The problem was that in order for the mortar shells to reach the fort at this extreme range, the British gunners had to load the two mortars with extra charges of gun powder. Unfortunately for the British, the mortar’s beds were not designed to handle the additional recoil caused by the added powder charge.\textsuperscript{115}

In his report to Congress, Major General Charles Lee mentioned the plight of \textit{Thunder}. He received the information about the ship’s trouble during the battle from five Royal Navy deserters who came to the American lines after the action. In his report, Lee wrote: “The \textit{Thunder} Bomb lay a considerable distance, throwing shells at the fort, and

\textsuperscript{114} Buchanan, 12-13; also see, Gordon, 42, and Wilson, 48-49.
\textsuperscript{115} Buchanan, 12-13; also see, Gordon, 42, and Wilson, 49.
by overcharging had shattered the beds and damaged the ship so much, as to render it necessary for her to go into dock before she can act again.\footnote{Major General Charles Lee to the Continental Congress, July 2, 1776, reprinted in \textit{The Pennsylvania Gazette}, July 24, 1776, Accessible Achieves, online, www.accessible.com, October 24, 2005} Its mortars were a considerable asset to Parker’s squadron’s fire power, and her loss was felt throughout the battle by the British. The self-inflicted damage to \textit{Thunder} was a major reason for the American victory. It was the only ship under Parker’s command that had guns capable of firing over the fort’s wall’s and with \textit{Thunder} out of action, all Parker’s other ships could do was pummel the fort walls, but because of the fort’s palmetto and earthen construction, that would prove to no advantage for the British.

At noon, Parker’s third division entered the main ship channel and began to make their planned flanking movement into the cove behind Sullivan’s Island, so they could fire on the fort’s unfinished western wall. Seeing the pounding the first division was receiving at the hands of the fort’s gunners, the local slave civilian pilots tried to steer the three British frigates, \textit{Acteon}, \textit{Syren}, and \textit{Sphynx}, as far away from the fort as possible. In their effort to avoid American artillery fire, the black pilots accidentally ran the three ships into the “middle ground,” and got them stuck on it. The “middle ground” was the large sandbar in the center of the mouth of Charleston Harbor, which later became the foundation for Fort Sumter. All British frigates assigned to flank the fort grounded themselves on this bar. Only \textit{Syren} and \textit{Sphynx} were able to refloat themselves, but by the time they got off the sandbar it was too late for them to rejoin the battle and try to flank the fort because of the receding tide. The third of the three frigates that had run aground on the “middle ground,” the \textit{Acteon}, was unable to free itself from the bar. It remained stuck there until the next morning when its Captain decided the situation was hopeless.
and that to prevent the rebels from taking it as a prize, it would have to be scuttled.\footnote{117 The Narrative of British Deserter Thomas Bennet, enclosed in letter from Henry Laurens to John Laurens, August 14, 1776, The Papers of Henry Laurens Vol. 11 January 5, 1776-November 1, 1777. ed. David R. Chesnutt (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1988) 243-245; Buchanan, 14; also see: Gordon, 42, and Wilson, 49 and 53.}

Commodore Parker explained the failure of third division to flank the fort in his report to the Admiralty by writing:

This last service was not preformed owing to the ignorance of the pilots who run the three frigates aground; the \textit{Sphynx} and \textit{Syren} got off in a few hours, but the \textit{Acteon} remained fast till the next morning when the captain and officers thought it proper to scuttle and set her on fire.\footnote{118 Commodore Sir Peter Parker report to The Lords of the Admiralty, July 9, 1776, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 12. ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1976) 169.}

The British flanking movement to the unfinished western wall of the fort was foiled by the local black pilots fear. They did not want to bring the ships into harms way. The pilots fear turned out to benefit the Americans greatly. Had the British made it into the cove behind the island and opened fire on the exposed unfinished wall, it is very likely that the outcome of the battle would have been different. If the British could have fired on the unfinished western wall of the fort, it is likely the British would have been able to drive the rebels from the fort with heavy losses.\footnote{119 Wilson 49, and 53.}

Meanwhile, on the northern tip of the Sullivan’s Island, Colonel Thompson and his men braced themselves for a British landing. They assumed that the British landing would occur at the same time as the naval bombardment. While Parker and the fleet were heavily engaged, Clinton ordered some of his men into flatboats, and ordered his field artillery to fire at the Americans, who were out of range, on the other side of the Breach. Several times Clinton ordered his men to try to land on Sullivan’s Island, but each time they were rebuffed by American artillery and well-aimed rifles. None of Clinton’s
attempted amphibious assaults actually made landfall.120 The truth is that after General Lee improved Thompson’s men’s dispositions, Clinton was unwilling to attack them. Clinton’s attempts on June 28, were half-hearted at best. He had no desire to attack the Americans in a strong dug-in position without artillery support. Also, Thompson’s force consisted of less then eight hundred men, but Clinton believed the American force opposing him numbered “3 or 4000 men.”121

The artillery exchange between the fort and Parker’s first division continued well into the afternoon. At about three in the afternoon, the guns of the fort fell silent. The move baffled Commodore Parker who believed that they guns of the fleet had forced the rebels to withdraw form the fort.122 In reality, the Americans were still very much in possession of the fort. Colonel Moultrie had ordered the artillery to stop firing in order to conserve powder. The Americans entered the battle with a shortage of ammunition. They only had forty-six hundred pounds of gun powder. That was enough to fire twenty eight rounds from each of the fort’s heavy guns on the southern rampart and bastions, facing the British warships. Moultrie had ordered the guns to cease fire because he had received an erroneous report that British infantry had landed on the island, and he wanted to conserve powder to repel a possible infantry assault on the fort. When the British infantry

attack did not come for more than an hour, Moultrie decided that the earlier report was wrong and ordered the fort’s artillery to resume firing at the British warships. 123

In total, the artillery dual between the Commodore Parker’s squadron and the American fort on Sullivan’s Island last more than nine hours. General Charles Lee, who was a seasoned professional solider, described the intensity of the engagement by describing it as, “one of the most furious and incessant fires I ever saw or heard.” 124 The Royal Governor of South Carolina, Lord William Campbell, who was aboard Parker’s flag ship, the Bristol, and was a career naval officer described the action as “one of the longest and severest cannonades I ever saw.” 125 The fight was bitterly contested, and saw incredible acts of individual gallantry. The most famous of these acts of heroism occurred early in the battle, and had to do with the garrison’s flag. The flag that flew over the fort during the battle was that of the 2nd South Carolina Regiment. Colonel Moultrie himself designed the flag. It had a blue field with a pale white crescent moon in the upper left hand corner, and across the bottom the word “LIBERTY” appeared in large white letters. Moultrie’s men had used this flag to replace the Union Jack when they captured Fort Johnson some months earlier and now it flew above the ramparts of the new fort. 126

During the battle, a British cannonball broke the fort’s flagstaff in half. The fort’s colors fell down on to the beach outside the fort. People watching the battle unfold from the wharfs and rooftops of Charleston and even some of the British sailors thought that the fort had surrendered. At this moment, Sergeant William Jasper, a member of the

123 Buchanan, 15; also see, Gordon, 42, and Wilson, 50-51.
126 Gordon, 42-43; also see, Wilson, 48.
grenadier company of the 2nd South Carolina Regiment, stepped to the fore. The South Carolina Gazette’s account of the battle relates Sergeant Jasper’s heroism:

In the beginning of the action, the flag staff was shot away; which being observed by Sergeant Jasper, of the grenadiers, he immediately jumped from one of the embrasures upon the beach, took up the flag, and fixed it on a sponge staff; with it in his hand, he mounted the merlon, and, notwithstanding the shot flew as thick as hail around him, he leisurely fixed it. 127

Jasper mounted the flag on the fort’s southern rampart, the wall directly facing the British fleet. 128 Jasper was recognized for his heroism the following day by Henry Laurens presented the noncommissioned officer “with a sword, as a mark of esteem for his distinguished valour.” 129

As a whole, the entire garrison of the fort on Sullivan’s Island fought remarkably well, despite the fact they relatively inexperienced. The South Carolina Gazette made the following commented on the performance of the fort’s garrison:

Our brave garrison (consisting of the 2nd regiment of provincials, a detachment of artillery, and some volunteers) under all these difficulties, which to the far greater part were entirely new, encouraged by the example of their gallant Commander Colonel William Moultrie, and the rest of the officers, behaved with the cool intrepidity of veterans; Our cannon were well served and did dreadful execution. 130

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128 Lumpkin, 16.
The American guns were indeed well served. During the ten-hour engagement the fort’s artillery used less than five thousand pounds of gun powder, whereas the British guns expended more than thirty-four thousand pounds of gunpowder during the battle.\textsuperscript{131} Despite the fact that Americans used far less ordnance then their opponents, their fire was far more effective. The most obvious evidence of the effectiveness of American artillery is the contrast in causalities between the two sides. In his report to Congress, Charles Lee reported Moultrie’s garrison’s losses at ten killed and twenty-two wounded.\textsuperscript{132} Losses aboard Parker’s ships were far worst. On his flagship alone, the Bristol, Parker reported forty killed and seventy-one wounded. He reported that aboard the Experiment losses were twenty-three killed and fifty-six wounded.\textsuperscript{133} On his two heavy frigates alone, Parker sustained losses more than six times that of the American defenders.

At nine o’clock that night, after darkness had set in, and after almost ten hours of intense fighting, Commodore Parker gave the order for the British ships to weigh anchor and withdraw beyond the range of the fort’s guns. With their ammunition almost completely expended, Parker realized that there was little advantage to be gained by continuing the engagement.\textsuperscript{134} The British pulled back to repair the battle damage sustained during the engagement. Over the next several weeks, the British soldiers on the Long Island returned to the transport ships and prepared to sail for New York. The last British ships departed South Carolinian waters on July 25, 1776.\textsuperscript{135} Governor Campbell left with the British fleet for New York, finally abandoning Carolina to the Whigs. The

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\textsuperscript{131} Buchanan, 15; also see, Wilson, 52-53.
\textsuperscript{133} Commodore Sir Peter Parker report to The Lords of the Admiralty, July 9, 1776, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 12, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1976) 169-170.
\textsuperscript{134} Commodore Sir Peter Parker report to The Lords of the Admiralty, July 9, 1776, Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783 Vol. 12, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin, Irish University Press, 1976) 169.
\textsuperscript{135} Wilson, 56.
\end{flushleft}
British abandoned their effort to take Sullivan’s Island and also abandoned their first southern strategy. The battle was over, and the Americans remained in control of Sullivan’s Island, while the British limped back to the north to meet the huge invasion force massing off the coast of New York.

The Cherokee War

In early July 1776, the Cherokee, encouraged by British agents, launched a massive attack across the whole southern frontier from Virginia to Georgia. The Cherokee raiding parties initially met with success, and caused panic and terror in the southern backcountry. As the southern colonies did not have to worry about a British threat after the Battle of Sullivan’s Island, they were able to concentrate their military resources on an all out effort against the Cherokee. The political leadership of South Carolina, led by William Henry Drayton, responded quickly to the attacks by ordering an all-out scorched earth campaign against the Cherokee.136 South Carolina militia and state troops embarked on a savage campaign into the Cherokee country. The Carolinian troops razed Cherokee towns, burned and destroyed Cherokee crops, and killed livestock. More than two thousand Cherokees were killed during the campaign. Those Cherokees that were unfortunate enough to be captured were sold into slavery.137

By October 1776, the once-feared Cherokee nation was crushed. The Cherokee withdrew to the west, behind the Blue Ridge Mountains. In May 1777, the Cherokee formally signed a peace treaty with the State of South Carolina. In the terms of the peace

136 Edgar, 36.
137 Buchanan, 25; also see Edgar, 36-37.
agreement, the Cherokee ceded all claims to lands east of the Blue Ridge. During the war, the Cherokee never again threatened the southern backcountry.138

Conclusion

The failure to capture the fort on Sullivan’s Island was an utter and complete British debacle. In the wake of the battle, Parker blamed Clinton and Clinton blamed Parker, but the reality is they both made grave errors that led to their defeat. There were five key factors that led to the British defeat at the Battle of Sullivan’s Island. First, the lowcountry elites had already soundly defeated the loyalists in South Carolina, so that they were unable to help the British invasion force when it finally arrived. Also, with the loyalist threat neutralized, the Carolinians could put their military resources into preparing to repel the British. The second reason for the outcome was the numerous costly delays the British experienced prior to the battle. The Continental defenders of Charleston used the time the British spent waiting for part of their fleet to arrive from Ireland, and waiting for their whole force to get over the harbor’s outer sandbar, to prepare themselves for the impending attack. While the British were delayed, Lee and Moultrie used the time to improve the city’s defensive works and train their raw troops.

The third factor that led to the British defeat was that both Clinton and Parker suffered from bad intelligence and a poor knowledge of local geography. The best example of the effect of this bad intelligence and lack of local knowledge was that Clinton’s whole plan to take Sullivan’s Island was based on a ford across the Breech inlet that did not exist. The fact that three of Parker’s frigates ran aground can also be attributed to a lack of local knowledge. Because he did not know the harbor, Parker had to depend on pressed civilian pilots who were not willing to be in harm’s way. The fourth

138 Edgar, 37; also see Lumpkin, 26.
reason for the outcome of the battle was the extremely capable American leadership. Despite his personal fault and later disgrace, the Battle of Sullivan’s Island could easily considered Major General Charles Lee’s finest hour. From training the southern Continental troops and making the ingenious disposition of Thompson’s forces on the northern end of Sullivan’s Island, Lee made several important contributions to the American victory. Colonel William Moultrie’s personal bravery and leadership during the battle inspired the fort’s defenders to stand up to the guns of the Royal Navy. The fifth and most important factor in the British defeat was that both of the British senior officers, but especially Parker, underestimated the resolve and capability of their American opponents.

The American victory at Sullivan’s Island freed the south of British encroachment for more then two years and a major British offensive for four years. Sullivan’s Island and the defeat of the Cherokee brought thirty months of peace to South Carolina and cemented the Rice Kings’ hold on political power in the new state. Now free of the threat of external invasion, the Whigs could focus on consolidating their power and developing the new state’s civil government. The results of the battle also convinced many southern loyalists to abandon the British side and either join the Whigs or become neutral. For example, on July 22, 1776, a month after the Battle of Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina loyalists petitioned the new state government “to take an oath of neutrality…giving security for our peaceable behavior.”

By the summer of 1776, South Carolina was completely in the hands of the Whigs, who were led by the Rice Kings. The Rice Kings, the rich lowcountry planters,

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like Henry Laurens, and John and Edward Rutledge, took complete political power in South Carolina during the first two years of the American Revolution by destroying royal rule, beating back a British invasion, and neutralizing those population groups that could potentially vie for power. They placed themselves at the top of the state’s new government. Effectively, the men of this small elite class would control the state’s politics and economy until the end of the American Civil War, more than eighty five years later.

In the wake of the Battle of Sullivan’s Island, the war shifted to the north and British attention focused on the capture of New York and Philadelphia. The outcome of Sullivan’s Island was a major morale boost to the American cause, but any lasting effect on American morale was soon destroyed by the disastrous defeats suffered by the main Continental Army in the battles around New York later that summer. The American victory at Sullivan’s Island also had another important effect on the course of the war. It led to a false sense of invincibility among southern Continental officers and more importantly southern politicians. As the war progressed, this air of invincibility led to complacency among southern leaders. This complacency was one of the leading reasons for the fall of Charleston when the war returned to South Carolina four years later.
The British returned to South Carolina in the spring of 1780. They wreaked havoc on the state for the next two years, but they were unable to gain complete control. The more than two-year hiatus in the war allowed the lowcountry elite to further consolidate their power. Even the fall of Charleston on May 12, 1780, did not unseat them from power, as Governor John Rutledge and some of his council were able to escape to maintain a working government. The British thrust into the south was eventually defeated by American Generals Daniel Morgan and Nathanael Greene at the January 19, 1781, Battle of Cowpens and the March 15, 1781, Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Finally, in December 14, 1782, the British evacuated Charleston for good. Once the war was over, the lowcountry elites, or Rice Kings, continued their dominance of South Carolina politics and left their mark on the national political scene.

The early stages of the American Revolution in South Carolina are significant because the lowcountry elites were able to firmly establish themselves in power. They effectively executed a “coupe de estate” and placed themselves at the head of the province’s new government. From that point on, they became a key faction on the national political scene, and played a key role in numerous pivotal events between the end of the War for Independence and the beginning of the Civil War. Ultimately, the triumph of the Rice Kings in the American Revolution has to be viewed as one of most tragic and unfortunate events in American history, as it served to perpetuate the life of the chattel slave system, and set America on course for a catastrophic confrontation over the issue of slavery.
The Rice Kings’ triumph in 1776 planted the seeds for the devasting American Civil War of the 1860’s. On April 12, 1861, South Carolinians opened fire on the federal garrison of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, beginning a four-year war over the issue of slavery. It was not until the fall of Confederacy in 1865 that the Rice Kings were forced to relinquish power. It is fair to assert that legacy of the Rice Kings’ triumph has continued to reverberated through America history in the form of the strained race relations that trouble the nation to this day.
Appendix I, Major Figures

Campbell, Lord William - He was the Royal Governor of South Carolina from June 18, 1775 until he left for New York with the British fleet after the battle of Sullivan’s Island. He was a career Royal Navy officer and had served as post Captain in Charleston before being appointed governor.

Clinton, Major General (later Lieutenant General Sir) Henry (1730-1795) - He commanded the British forces that attack Charleston in the summer of 1776. He went on to become the commander and chief of British forces in North America in 1778.

Germain, Lord George (1716-1785) - He was Secretary of State for America, in Lord Frederick North’s Ministry from 1775-1782.

Laurens Henry (1724-1792) - He was a prominent South Carolina lowcountry planter. He served in the South Carolina Provincial Congress, and the South Carolina Committee of Safety. He went on to serve as President of the Continental Congress 1777-1780.

Legge, William Second Earl of Dartmouth (1731-1801) - He was the Secretary of State for America in Lord Frederick North’s ministry from 1772-1775.

Lee, Major General Charles (1731-1782) - He was a career British officer who served in the Continental Army. He was in command of the defense of Charleston in 1776. He was eventually court-martialed for actions during the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse.

Moultrie, Colonel (later Brigadier General) William (1730-1805) - He was the commander of the garrison of the fort on Sullivan’s Island in 1776.

Parker, Commodore (later Admiral Sir) Peter (1721-1811) - He commanded the naval forces assigned to the Charleston expedition in 1776. He went on to have a successful naval career, attaining the rank of Admiral of the fleet.
Appendix II, Chronology of Events

1760-1763

- The Cherokee War in the Southern Backcountry

1763

- February 10. The Treaty of Paris is signed ending the Seven Year’s War

1765

- The Stamp Act is enacted. There is a riot in Charleston over the tax.

1767-1769

- The Regulator Crisis in the South Carolina Backcountry

1770

- The conflict between the Commons House of Assembly and royal officials begins

1771

- Effective Royal Government in South Carolina ceases

1774

- Representative from all over South Carolina meet and elect delegates to the First Continental Congress.

1775

- January 11, The First South Carolina Provincial Congress convenes in Charleston
- April 19, the American Revolution begins with the Battles of Lexington and Concord
- June 14, South Carolina Council of Safety is elected
- September 15, Whig forces seize Fort Johnson giving them control of Charleston Harbor.
-December, the Snow Campaign, Colonel Richard Richardson and Whig militia subdue loyalists resistance in the backcountry.

1776

-February 27, Whig forces in North Carolina defeat a loyalist army at the Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge.

-March 26, South Carolina becomes the second of the American colonies to adopt a constitution.

-The British fleet arrives off the Charleston Sandbar

-June 28, an attempted British invasion of South Carolina is defeated at the Battle of Sullivan’s Island.

-July 4, The Continental Congress declares Independence from Britain

-July-October, The Cherokee War along the Carolina frontier.
Appendix III, Maps

Map I. South Carolina

Map from: www.maps.com

Map II. Charleston Harbor

Map from:

http://www.drfarchaeology.com/Content/Ft%20Johnson/FJ%20images/Fig1chas.jpg
Map III. Sullivan’s Island

Map from: www.libs.uga.edu
Map IV. Charleston Harbor II

Map from: http://www.usgennet.org/usa/topic/colonial/graphics/map14_a.gif
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