The Hanging Rock Battlefield Project: Part I

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The Battle of Hanging Rock was fought on August 6, 1780, near the present Kershaw-Lancaster County line (see sidebar, page 5). It was one of the largest battles of the Revolution in South Carolina. Nearly 2,000 participants, most of them Americans on one side of the rebellion or the other, fought to an exhausted standstill after a complex, shifting engagement that lasted some three hours and exacted heavy casualties on both sides. While the battle took its name from the unusual outcrop called Hanging Rock, the fighting was not in the immediate vicinity of that landmark. Exactly where it did take place has been something of a mystery, thanks to the difficulty of imposing vague and contradictory 18th century accounts onto the modern landscape.

For nearly 30 years, Columbia businessman and Revolutionary War researcher, John Allison, has been interested in the Hanging Rock problem. He has conducted what is probably definitive historical research on the subject, but the history alone was not adequate to locate and interpret the battlefield. With the cooperation of nearly all of the landowners in the vicinity, Allison conducted metal detector surveys over an area of several hundred acres, finding and mapping physical evidence for the Battle of Hanging Rock. This artifact evidence, mostly fired and unfired musket balls and rifle balls, appears to define at least two of the three major components of the battlefield as understood from the historical record.

John Allison is far from being the first non-professional to pursue what is essentially an archaeological question through metal detecting. Even non-research oriented detectorists can become intensely interested in understanding the sites that they collect from, and they are sometimes quite successful in figuring things out for themselves. Unfortunately, that is typically as far as they take the process. Their methods remain unsystematic, their data (if any) is informal, and their artifact collections are ill-provenienced, at best. There is almost never a publication or an archived record (such as a state site form) resulting from these endeavors, and as a whole they constitute a huge loss of irreplaceable information. John Allison’s work on the Hanging Rock battlefield will have a much more useful and durable outcome. In September, 2010, John convinced me that he was on the right track, and we agreed that it was time to bring his Hanging Rock project in from the cold. I applied for an Archaeological Research Trust (ART) grant that would allow me to devote three weeks of my time to the project, with the lofty goal of “advancing the project from the realm of a relatively informal, personal effort to the level of a professional archaeological research project.” More specifically, we proposed three major tasks:

1. Intensive, systematic metal detector survey of the several areas where battle artifacts had already been recovered, in order to “confirm and characterize these areas as battlefield components.”

2. Metal detector reconnaissance across the remainder of the battlefield vicinity, “not only to ensure that no major battlefield components are missed, but also to provide negative evidence—a matrix of negative landscape, where little or no battle material is found, is necessary to define
3. Analysis of new and existing artifact collections, given that “definitive analysis of the artifacts is required before they can be of any interpretive value. Small arms ammunition (lead shot) is particularly useful in a battlefield study, assuming it has undergone informed analysis.”

In spite of this tortured language, I was awarded the grant, and in January, we began field work. We spent a total of about two weeks on the battlefield in January, with an interruption for heavy snow, and we worked additional weekends through the spring. Our final effort was the very hot long weekend of June 12-14. John Allison arranged for an impressive turn-out of volunteers during the January work, including several experienced metal detectorists, and others who assisted me with GPS mapping of artifact locations and search areas. On several days we had crews of six or eight individuals in the field. Throughout the project, some detector operators were given reconnaissance tasks, while others undertook intensive (100%) coverage of formally delineated areas. We logged a total of 209 person-hours of actual detecting, exclusive of other field activities.

We began coverage on a mostly wooded ridge that previous finds suggested was the camp of Col. Bryan’s North Carolina Loyalists. That camp was the first position attacked and overrun by the Americans, with Bryan’s men fleeing in disorder after a brief resistance. Almost immediately, on the crest of the ridge, we encountered a heavy scatter of unfired musket ammunition and several buttons that I believe define Bryan’s camp. Also on the crest, we recovered a number of fired rifle balls that are very probably artifacts of the American attack. This component of the battlefield is more than a mile from the Hanging Rock.

We found a thin scatter of artifacts stretching nearly half a mile from Bryan’s camp to another location in a large plowed field. This scatter included fired lead shot, iron case shot balls and small gun parts, and is very likely evidence for the contested American advance from Bryan’s camp to the central British provincials camp. That camp was also captured after heavy fighting. Unfortunately, the field where the central camp was located has been heavily metal detected for decades, and relatively few artifacts remain. Nevertheless, we found more than enough to confirm the site.

After they were driven from the second of their three camps, the remaining defenders of the Hanging Rock post rallied to form a defensive infantry square for a last stand. Participant accounts suggest that this position was at or near the third of the Hanging Rock camps, but the location is uncertain. By that stage of the battle, Thomas Sumter’s Americans were
exhausted and nearly out of ammunition, and when a small reinforcement of enemy cavalry appeared, the attack on the third position was abandoned. We cannot claim to have located this third and final position. There is a broad, very thin scatter of fired ammunition stretching for hundreds of yards beyond the center camp position, but we found no meaningful concentration. Some areas have been heavily impacted by relic hunting, while others have undergone severe soil erosion. More work is needed on that part of the battlefield.

While an additional round of field work is certainly in order, we have decided to call it a finished season, and to stop and digest what we have so far. Analysis and report preparation are underway. I will report our results in more detail in the next issue of Legacy, together with any plans for a second field season.

Acknowledgements.

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