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The Battle of Hanging Rock

By James Legg

Immediately after the fall of Charleston to the British in May 1780, the victors began a campaign to subjugate the interior of South Carolina. The task did not appear to be a serious challenge. The only remaining “Rebel” force of any importance was a ragged little army of South Carolina and North Carolina militia, commanded (after June 15th) by Thomas Sumter. This force consisted largely of upcountry riflemen, most of them mounted. They were far too few in number to directly oppose the British occupation. Lord Cornwallis’ strategy for returning South Carolina to the Crown was two-fold. First, he established a chain of fortified posts in the interior, the most important of which were at Augusta, Ninety-Six, and Camden. Secondly, he expected a general popular uprising of loyalist citizens to present themselves for service with a royal militia. These two developments would surely convince any remaining holdouts that their cause was lost, and Cornwallis might turn his attention to reconquering the remainder of the Southern colonies.

The British interior posts were quickly established, but the effort to raise a loyalist militia was poorly organized and supplied, and the turnout was less than overwhelming. More ominously in the summer of 1780, the Rebels became



Fig. 1: Thomas Sumter, the “South Carolina Gamecock,” by Charles Willson Peale.

increasingly active and dangerous beyond the frontier of British control. Small posts and patrols of loyalists were variously captured, disarmed, ambushed, and slaughtered. A large uprising of loyalists in southern North Carolina was completely crushed. While there was still clearly no American force that might oppose a British field army, British authority in the backcountry was almost non-existent.

Several smaller, outlying posts supplemented the major British post at Camden. About 20 miles north of Camden, an extensive camp complex was established along the south bank of Hanging Rock Creek, north of the remarkable conglomerate outcrop called Hanging Rock. The garrison there may have totaled as many as 1,300, including loyalist militia and provincial troops—the latter were “semi-regular” British units whose personnel were recruited in the colonies. A small detachment of Royal Artillery was also present. These forces were dispersed among three camps arrayed from west to east (or southeast) on cultivated high ground south of the creek. Contrary to some sources, the positions were apparently not fortified.

On July 30th, Thomas Sumter’s force attacked a smaller, heavily fortified British post at Rocky Mount, about 15 miles west of Hanging Rock. The Americans were repulsed after a severe action. That same day, North Carolinians under William R. Davie, who was serving under Sumter, cut off a loyalist column nearing the Hanging Rock camps. The loyalists were massacred, without quarter, within sight of the camps.

On the morning of August 6th, 1780, Sumter threw his entire force of at least 600 (probably many more) against the post of Hanging Rock. Attacking from the west and north, the Americans surprised and immediately overran the left (western) camp, which was held by several hundred North Carolina loyalists under Col. Samuel Bryan. Bryan’s men fled in disorder, and

Sumter’s men turned their attention to the second of the three camps, where the defenders were mostly British provincials. The defenders employed light artillery firing canister, and launched at least two determined infantry counterattacks against the Americans, but Sumter’s riflemen nearly annihilated the musket-wielding British. After a fierce struggle, the second camp was also overrun, and the defenders retreated to the vicinity of the third camp. There they formed a formal infantry square, and awaited their fate. By this time, however, Sumter’s men were nearly exhausted, and were almost out of ammunition, including what they had captured. Many had left the ranks to loot the enemy camps, and some had made



Fig. 2: “Hanging Rock,” as depicted by Benson Lossing in 1849.

liberal use of captured rum. When a small reinforcement of provincial cavalry arrived from Rocky Mount, the American advance halted, and Sumter’s men began a gradual withdrawal. Casualty figures for the battle vary widely—it suffices to say that losses were serious on both sides.

The attack on Hanging Rock was well planned, savage, and sustained. While it was not a complete American victory, it must have given the British something to contemplate. But for the timing, Hanging Rock might have a more substantial place among the battles of the Southern Campaign. As it was, it was followed on August 16th by the destruction of the new regular American army in the South, at the Battle of Camden. Two days later, Thomas Sumter’s militia army was routed and dispersed at Fishing Creek. Once again, it must have seemed that there was little to interfere with the British reconquest of the South.