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Applied Research

SCIAA's Military Site Program Assists Historic Brattonsville In Locating Williamson's Plantation Battlefield

By Steven D. Smith

At dawn on the morning of July 12, 1780, American militia surprised British forces camped at James Williamson's plantation, located along the South Fork of Fishing Creek in modern day York County, South Carolina. In a short, sharp fight, the Americans, under the combined command of William Bratton, Andrew Neel, and Edward Lacey, and numbering between 150 to 300 men, dispersed 35 British Legion, 20 New York Volunteers, and 50 Loyalist militia commanded by Captain Christian Huck. Thirty British were killed and 35 more were wounded, while the Americans lost only one man. The victory, sometimes referred to as "Huck's Defeat" or "Williamson's plantation," was significant for its morale boost to the American Revolutionary cause, coming close after the May 1780 surrender of the Continental Army in Charleston. On March 22, 2006, the York County Culture and Heritage Museum awarded the Military Sites Program of SCIAA a contract to search for the Williamson's plantation battlefield.

Historic records indicated that the battle occurred around James Williamson's plantation house a quarter mile east of Colonel William Bratton's plantation. Colonel

Museum historian, Michael Scoggins, recently completed a detailed account of the battle titled, "The Day it Rained Militia," and SCIAA archaeologists Steven D. Smith,

James B. Legg, and Frank King, with the assistance of metal detector specialist Spencer Barker, used Scoggins' excellent work as the basis for their search.

Scoggins' research led him to the conclusion that the battlefield was somewhere within a 25-acre area in the southeastern portion of the CHM property, but also that it extended to the south, beyond the Brattonsville property on land privately owned. Two historic maps appeared to show the Williamson house near a spring. There are in fact, several modern springs along the South Fork of Fishing Creek but all were concentrated within

the 25-acre area defined by Scoggins. The SCIAA team also had information, via Camden attorney, Charles Baxley, from an anonymous relic collector. The collector provided a map of where he had found musket

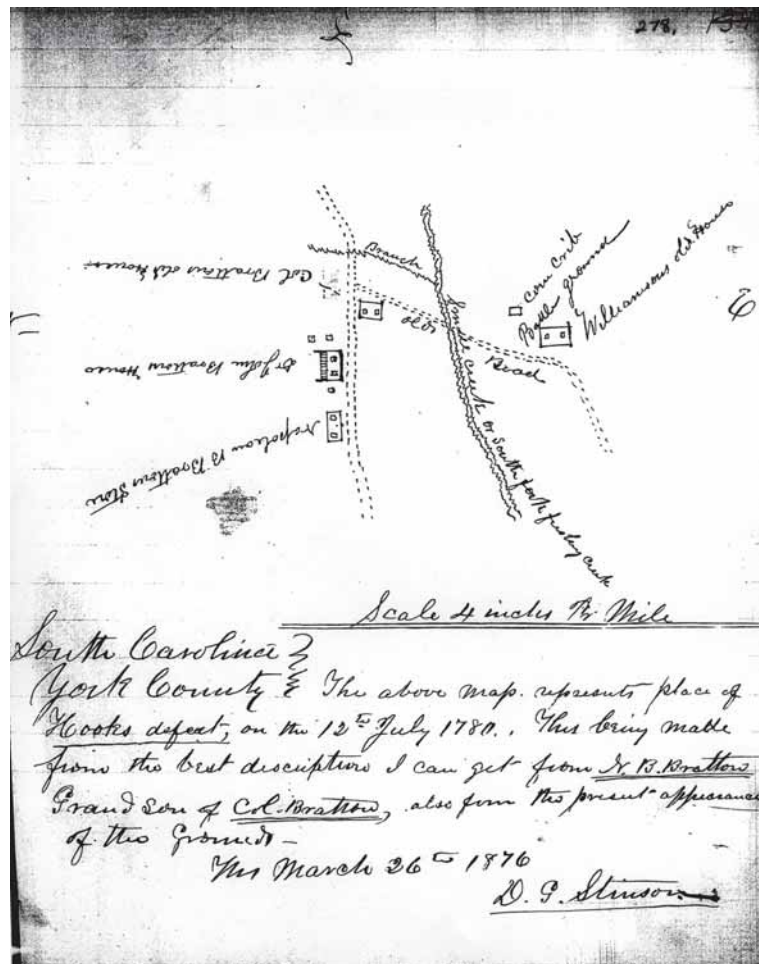


Fig. 1: Battlefield map drawn by D.G. Stinson from information supplied by Napoleon Bonaparte Bratton, 26 March 1876. (Lyman C. Draper papers, courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society).

Bratton's historic home is now part of Historic Brattonsville, a 775-acre living history center under the Culture and Heritage Museum's (CHM) administration. The park includes numerous historic and reconstructed buildings including Bratton's original plantation house.

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Fig. 2: Fired lead balls from the Hucks Defeat Battlefield. (Photo courtesy of Steve Smith)

balls 200 yards east of Bratton's house. That particular location is now a lightly wooded area used as picnic grounds and a reconstructed school house. Relic collector information can be very useful and as that particular information loosely fit the historic accounts, the area was considered another high priority search area.

The SCIAA team searched the relic collector's area first and was surprised to immediately come across large musket balls reminiscent of the diameter of balls fired from British Brown Bess muskets. However, as more and more balls were recovered, the team became suspicious. There were too many finds from an area known to have been heavily collected in the past, and some balls did not have the heavy white patina usually found on balls buried in the ground for some 200 years. That was when it dawned on the team that Historic Brattonsville was also the site location for the movie, *The Patriot*, and that the balls were in an area that movie reenactors had camped. Once

they were cleaned and measured it was clear that all of the balls were modern. Interestingly, the team recovered a line of dropped balls, indicating the spot where reenactors had stood in a line and fired at a target, perhaps for sound testing, close-up shots, or out of just plain boredom.

Back on the ground, the team searched the deep woods farther to

the east of the reenactor camp and eventually located a concentration of 16 fired rifle balls, and one badly chewed musket ball from a British Land Pattern musket. These 17 balls strongly suggested that the site was at least part of the battlefield, the balls representing American militia firing at the British in camp. In addition, the artifact concentration included a British halfpenny, a brass trigger guard fragment, six pewter spoon fragments, eight melted pewter fragments, six shoe buckles and fragments, a knee buckle, seven wrought nails, two wrought horseshoes, five 18th century buttons, and other iron artifacts. Given the large amount of domestic material the team speculated that this area contained one or more of Williamson's plantation outbuildings, a finding consistent with the historic descriptions of the battlefield.

The location of the single British musket ball, upslope from most of the rifle balls, led the team to speculate that they had found the Loyalist campsite, but that Williamson's main plantation house was farther upslope (south) of the



Fig. 3: James Legg and Annette Snapp conduct a metal detecting survey on site. (Photo courtesy of Steve Smith)

site, off the Museum's property. If the British regulars were camped around the main house, perhaps more dropped Brown Bess musket balls and evidence of Williamson's house would be found just off the property. Much of it in this area was now a modern road, but there was thought to still be the possibility of additional battlefield finds.

In December 2006, the museum was able to obtain permission to search the area just south of their property. The results of this effort were discouraging on one hand but exciting on the other. The team was able to search a total of about five additional acres. No additional evidence of the battle or Williamson's plantation was found. Unfortunately, the entire search area was heavily disturbed by erosion and heavy mechanical equipment. Nevertheless, it did not appear that a colonial occupation was there. In fact, they found no evidence of 18th century material. Regardless of the disturbances, some 18th century pottery sherds or other evidence of a colonial period occupation would have been found if the site extended in that direction.



Fig. 4: Frank King taking GPS readings on site. (Photo courtesy of Steve Smith)

At the same time, the underbrush at the original battlefield site had died back significantly, allowing the team better search conditions there. More work in that area yielded an additional seven rifle balls and a carbine or pistol ball. In total, the team recovered 25 balls out of a total 96 metal finds. Or, to put it another way, 26% of our finds were lead balls, all but two being rifle balls. There is

now no doubt that this site is the Williamson's plantation battlefield.

Based on the work to date, two possibilities exist regarding the low number of musket balls and the lack of finds to the south of the site. Either what was found is all that is left of the battlefield and the finds are the result of the Americans surprise being so great that the British were routed without returning fire, or, that the battlefield still extends to the south, but there is a gap between this site and another battlefield concentration farther south.

Of course the team realizes that it was not the first to discover the Williamson's plantation battlefield since unknown private relic collectors probably knew its location long before the team's find. In fact, their finds may be at least part of the reason for the lack of British musket balls in SCIAA's collection. Nevertheless, the CHM now knows the location and has obtained a collection of artifacts from the battle. The museum can now begin to preserve and interpret the battlefield for public benefit.



Fig. 5: A variety of buckles and buttons were found during the survey of Williamson's plantation. (Photo courtesy of Steve Smith)