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Military Site Program Returns to Williamson’s Plantation Battlefield

By Steven D. Smith

In May 2010, York County’s Culture & Heritage Museums (CHM) invited SCIAA’s Military Sites Program (MSP) back to Historic Brattonsville, South Carolina, to continue to search for archaeological remains of the Revolutionary War battle of Williamson’s plantation also called Huck’s Defeat. Under the direction of CHM’s historian, Dr. Michael C. Scoggins and myself, archaeologists and volunteers spent three weeks conducting a metal detecting survey and hand excavations in an attempt to better define the battlefield that had been discovered by SCIAA in 2006. The May 2010 project was funded by the American Battlefield Protection Program of the National Park Service.

The battle of Williamson’s plantation occurred July 12, 1780, when the American militia forces under the overall command of General Thomas Sumter surprised a company of British Provincial troops under the command of Captain Christian Huck who were camped at the plantation. The day before, Captain Huck and his command, which consisting of 35 British Legion, 20 New York Volunteers, and 50 Tory militia, appeared at Colonel William Bratton’s plantation in the hopes of capturing Bratton and other rebel leaders. Bratton was not home. After harassing Bratton’s wife, Huck and his men, moved to nearby James Williamson’s plantation and camped overnight. At dawn on the morning of July 12th, the Americans consisting of between 150 to 300 men under the combined command of William Bratton, Andrew Neel, and Edward Lacey surprised the British and in a short, sharp fight, killed 30 and wounded 35, while the Americans lost only one man. The victory was significant for its morale boost to the American Revolutionary cause, coming close after the May surrender of the American Continental Army in Charleston.

Historical documentation indicated that the James Williamson family settled 300 acres on the South Fork of Fishing Creek in 1766. At the time of the Battle of Huck’s Defeat in 1780, the Williamson plantation included a two-story log house, a corncrib, and a stable or barn. The plantation included fruit tree orchards and fields of oats and wheat, located on the southern end of the Williamson property. Accounts of the battle indicate that the action began several 100 yards south or southwest of the Williamson home place and moved in a northeast direction, with the final phase of the battle taking place around the Williamson home where Whig militiamen engaged mounted troops of...
metallic domestic materials, including a door strap hinge, were found.

After the metal detecting survey, several 1 X 2 and 2 X 2-meter units were excavated across the site of the metal artifact concentrations. Oddly, only a few colonial ceramic sherds were found, and these artifacts were all of the same type of 18th century redware and could have been from a single plate. No pipe stems were found. In addition to these formal excavation units, systematic shovel testing was conducted, yet, no evidence of the Williamson house was found.

Despite the lack of archaeological evidence of the house, Scoggins and I are convinced we have found a portion of the battlefield and perhaps, all that is left in the archaeological record. A careful landscape study was conducted in conjunction with the historic records. This study identified key defining features mentioned in the documents describing the plantation and the battle, including such features as natural springs and a lane or road that documents describe as leading to the Bratton house. At the location of the metal artifact concentrations, remnants of the old road and several active springs were found just as described. Also the location of the metal artifact concentrations fit the recorded distance from the Bratton house, which still stands today, to the Williamson house and the plat records. The only missing element is evidence of the Williamson house itself.

A secondary project goal was a public archaeology opportunity and the archaeologists were strongly supported by as many as 14 volunteers. Also Dr. Jonathan Leader’s Maymester Class in Remote Sensing at the University of South Carolina volunteered two days of metal detecting and conducting a resistivity survey.

Scoggins and I completed a draft report in July 2010 and are awaiting comments from the American Battlefield Protection Program. A final report is expected by December 2010. Meanwhile the information gained from the battlefield will be used for site interpretation and preservation.