Battlefield Research Continues At SCIAA

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The Military Sites Program of the Institute's Applied Research Division (ARD) continues to grow. Over the last two years it has completed several projects and is looking forward to new opportunities in 2003. In September of 2002, the program completed its portion of a nation-wide survey for the National Park Service's (NPS) American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP). The purpose of the ABPP survey was to determine the most current preservation status of thousands of Revolutionary War sites across the eastern United States. The sites were pre-selected by a panel of experts and most had been listed on the National Register many years ago. The ABPP wanted to know if the sites still existed or had been lost to development since their listing. They also wanted to know if the traditional locations and activities associated with the sites were accurate and authentic. The ABPP contracted with hundreds of public and private archaeologists, park rangers, and historians to research and visit the sites and provide a status update. The sites were divided into two categories: battlefields and associated sites such as campgrounds and hospitals.

As Principal Investigator for SCIAA, I was responsible for researching the status of 39 Revolutionary War battlefield and associate sites in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee. The project began with a week-long training session at Monmouth, New Jersey, where I learned the ABPP's methodology for data collection using the Battle of Monmouth as the working example. The workshop was to insure that the same kinds of information would be gathered for each site assigned, and that the information would be reported in the same format. Then for the next two years I conducted research in the primary documents, visited the sites, took photographs and GPS locations, interviewed local experts, and compiled numerous data files for each site. While the project was primarily my responsibility, I got excellent and timely rescuing from the Institute's Christopher Clement, Tamara Wilson, and Tommy Charles. Additional help came from Kristen Labrie, a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology, historian Samuel Fore of the South Caroliniana Library, archaeologist Zada Law of Nashville, Tennessee, and student Nathan Smith of St. Peters Elementary School.

Although the project was far more intensive and time consuming than I ever imagined, the research and travel throughout the tri-state area gave me a unique perspective of the war that I could not have gained by any other means. For instance, prior to this project, I had the misconception that 18th century communication and maneuver was slow and time consuming. Instead, war events and fortunes were in constant ebb and flow. Communications was rapid; couriers got messages to far-flung commanders usually within a day or two. Soldiers covered more ground in much less time than I ever imagined. Foot soldiers could force march 20 to 30 miles a day for several days and mounted troops covered as much as 60 miles or more a day in many instances. The war’s pace was amazing. Francis Marion’s partisans, for instance, were on the move almost constantly in the Fall of 1780 and Spring of 1781, never camping for more than a few days in any one location. I was also impressed with the professionalism of the British Army. From their correspondence and maneuvers it seems to have never occurred to them that they might loose a battle against the Americans. In battle after battle, they deployed quickly and pushed frontal attacks. When attacked they counter-attacked as soon as possible. More often than not their confidence led to victory, especially against American militia. But when it didn’t, as at King's Mountain and Cowpens, they were quite shocked.

Some of the South Carolina sites I visited were Eutaw Springs, Fort Watson, Ninety Six, Fort Littleton, Old Dorchester, Washaw Church, Pegues Place, Belleville Plantation, and Snow’s Island. In North Carolina, my sites extended from Halifax Historic Site in the northeastern part of the state to Franklin in the west. Tennessee sites were associated with the Kings Mountain campaign and skirmishes with Cherokee Indians.

Although an overall success, some battle sites could not be found within the time allotted, especially Cherokee town sites in western North Carolina that were raided by backcountry militia. A few associated sites were simply too big to
complete within a limited timeframe. For instance, the entire Race to the Dan Campaign was considered one associated site. This campaign began after the battle of Cowpens when Daniel Morgan defeated Banastre Tarleton. Learning of Tarleton's defeat, Lord Cornwallis attempted to catch Morgan and Nathanael Greene before they could combine their forces and reach safety in Virginia. Thus the chase took both armies all the way from Cowpens, South Carolina, through North Carolina, to the Dan River in Virginia. Needless to say, this “site,” which covered over a hundred miles, could not be researched, visited, GPS mapped, and the data compiled all in a single week as required by funding. Still, identifying the routes and various skirmish sites on maps proved to be a useful exercise and demonstrated that it was truly a race from river ford to river ford, the British always just a day or a few hours behind.

While this project progressed through 2001 and into 2002, shorter projects were initiated and completed. A historic context for a World War II African American Noncommissioned Officers’ Club was written for Fort Bragg, North Carolina through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Research Laboratories in Champaign, Illinois. As part of this project, I had the honor to interview veterans of the 555th Parachute Battalion, the only African American parachute unit in World War II.

Another short-term project recently completed was in assisting the South Carolina Palmetto Conservation Foundation with their collector’s survey of the Revolutionary War Camden Battlefield. The foundation is working to acquire the core battle area for long-term preservation. The foundation contracted with Jim Legg and I to examine artifacts found by relic collectors at the Camden Battlefield and gather information on their general location across the battlefield landscape. Jim was responsible for the analysis of the collections and mapping of artifact locations while I concentrated on a short battle history. The results are providing insights on the maneuver of American and British units during the battle. This project was also funded by the ABPP.

I await future opportunities as they come, but meanwhile I am assisting the South Carolina National Guard in a history of the modern guard and continuing in the never-ending pursuit of Francis Marion, always just a day or a few hours behind.