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Finding a Revolutionary War Skirmish Site: Lower Bridge

By Steven D. Smith

In the spring of 1781, General Charles Cornwallis, commander of British forces in the southern theatre, was chasing General Nathanael Greene's Continental army across North Carolina in a campaign which became known as the 'Race to the Dan.' Americans in South Carolina were without regular army support and the British were in control of all the major towns and villages, including Charleston, Augusta, Ninety Six, Camden, and Georgetown. Lt. Colonel Francis Rawdon, commander of the British field forces remaining in South Carolina was now finally able to focus on eliminating that pest in the northeastern part of the state by the name of Francis Marion.

Rawdon ordered Lt. Colonel John Watson Tadwell-Watson (not a typo) to lead an expedition of nearly 500 men and two cannon to find and destroy Marion. Watson was also something of a pest, or as Cornwallis had once described him; that "plague." When Watson had arrived in Charleston as part of a large British reinforcement, Cornwallis had passed off Watson to Rawdon. Rawdon assigned Watson the northeastern part of the state where Marion ranged, partially as a means of getting him away from Camden. Watson built Fort Watson along the Santee as his base camp and was there when he received the order to go after Marion. Two weeks later, Rawdon would also send a



Figure 2: The Author and SCIAA Archaeologist Caroline Hall assist Public History student find an artifact. (Photo by Stacey Young)

detachment from Camden under Colonel Welbore Ellis Doyle after Marion, either as part of a planned two-pronged assault, or as I believe, as a result of a Loyalist offering his services to guide Doyle to Marion's Snow's Island camp.

Watson moved out on March 7, 1781, to begin what historians have called 'Marion's Bridges Campaign.' In effect, this was a running battle lasting until March 21, with Watson eventually plodding into Trapier's plantation near Georgetown after being under constant harassment by Marion including ambushes, skirmishing, and sharpshooting. There he would whine that Marion's men would not "fight like

gentlemen."

Watson did not have to search much for Marion. He was already nearby, camped downstream from Fort Watson and once his scouts saw Watson on the march, Marion came to him. The two forces first met on opposite sides of a causeway at Wiboo Swamp on March 8 (now under Lake Marion). After a back and forth battle up and down the causeway, Watson brought up his artillery, brushed off Marion's cavalry, then followed up with a bayonet charge, forcing Marion to fall back. The following day they met again at Mount Hope Swamp, and again, Watson decided the skirmish with artillery.

A few days later, on March 12, Watson was on the march again down the Santee Road apparently heading for Georgetown, with Marion in his front looking for another place to make a stand. Suddenly, Watson stopped, turned around, and took the northern road toward Kingstree, South Carolina. If he could get across the Lower Bridge across the Black River and march into Kingstree, he would flank Marion, open Williamsburg County to British foragers, and have a straight line to Snow's Island. Realizing he had been outflanked, Marion ordered a detachment of 70 mounted men, including riflemen, to



Figure 1: The Author demonstrates how metal detectors work to Dr. Louis Venter's Public History Class at the Lower Bridge site. (Photo by Stacey Young)



Figure 3: SCIAA Archaeologist Sarah Rogers assists Public History student at the Lower Bridge Site. (Photo by Stacey Young)

ride quickly to the Lower Bridge and block Watson, while he brought up the rest of his command. Knowing the countryside, they were able to get ahead of Watson, cross the river, remove some bridge planks, and set fire to others. Marion soon appeared, crossed to the east bank, and placed his men behind the riflemen, who were spread out along the bank below the bridge.

Historical descriptions of Lower Bridge note that the west bank was high while the east bank was low and swampy, where Marion had deployed his men. Today, the location of the modern road and bridge appears to be very close to, if not along, the old colonial road, and the modern Highway 377 bridge crosses the river at the high west bank and then continues north along built-up causeway through swampy lowland toward Kingstree. Except for the artificial roadbed, local topography today seems to be as it was at the time of the Revolution.

Watson arrived at the high west bank of the bridge and saw that it could not be crossed. Only a few hundred yards downstream was an old ford, which Marion's men had crossed before Watson arrived. Watson brought up his artillery, but the artillerymen could not depress their cannon barrels low enough to fire effectively at the riflemen, and when they

moved farther down the bank, began to be picked off by accurate rifle fire. Nevertheless, Watson sent a detachment to force a river crossing, but again, Marion's rifle fire was too accurate, and the British were obliged to retreat. Watson decided he had had enough and made camp at a

nearby plantation where supposedly he said he "never saw such shooting in his life." Marion moved to "General's Island" a mile downstream from the ford. But he sent a detachment across the river to continue to harass Watson. Eventually, Watson decided to go to Georgetown to rest and refit his battered forces and was hit again at the Sampit Bridge before making it to the safety of Trapier's plantation just outside of Georgetown.

All research indicates the road and Lower Bridge are in the same location as they were in colonial times, however, no archaeological evidence has been found (that is, by professional archaeologists---who knows what private collectors have found) to locate the action more precisely. Last year archaeologist Stacey Young, formerly with SCIAA, and now with the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, contacted me and offered SCIAA the opportunity to search for evidence of the skirmish. State Parks had acquired 310 acres on the east side of the Black River east of the highway and is in the process of developing it into a public recreation park and small boat landing



Figure 4: The Author and Mr. Spencer Barker examine a buckshot found at the Lower Bridge Site. (Photo by Stacey Young)

called Black River State Park. Being interested in all things Francis Marion and having made an effort in the mid-2000s to find the skirmish site for the Francis Marion Trail Commission, I was all for it.

Mr. Spencer Barker, who had assisted me during the first survey many years ago, and I met with Stacey at the property in April of 2022. The river was in flood stage and the high ground available on the east bank was well defined. The site was in a pine forest with thick pine straw, and briars, except for a service road. Lidar of the landscape clearly showed a low drainage on the west bank, which was a logical place for the ford, and so we concentrated our efforts directly across from the mouth of the creek and in the roadbed. The location made sense based on a landscape analysis combined with the historic record. Using metal detectors, we soon found evidence of the skirmish.

If one speculated on what would be the minimum artifactual evidence one would need to declare that the skirmish site was confirmed, what would that be? Marion's front line was manned by riflemen, so unfired rifle balls would be good evidence. The British were across the river firing at the riflemen, so, fired musket balls on the east side would be good evidence of incoming British fire. Perhaps their musket balls should be of the size fired in a French Charleville musket, which Provincial and Loyalist troops would most likely have used. Marion's men were mounted, so, maybe some horse equipage? In fact, Spencer and I recovered one unfired rifle ball (10.9 g), one fired musket ball (21.6 g, consistent with a French, Charleville musket), two buckshot (2.4 g and 3.3 g, latter may be partially pewter), and a fragment of an iron horse bit. Bingo!

The evidence was strong; however, archaeologists can always use more so we wanted to return to the site when we could get better conditions. One year later, Stacey was able to get the area where we found the artifacts, cleared using a bushhog. I invited a friend of mine, Professor Louis Venters who teaches Public History at Francis Marion University to bring his students to the site as part of a class field

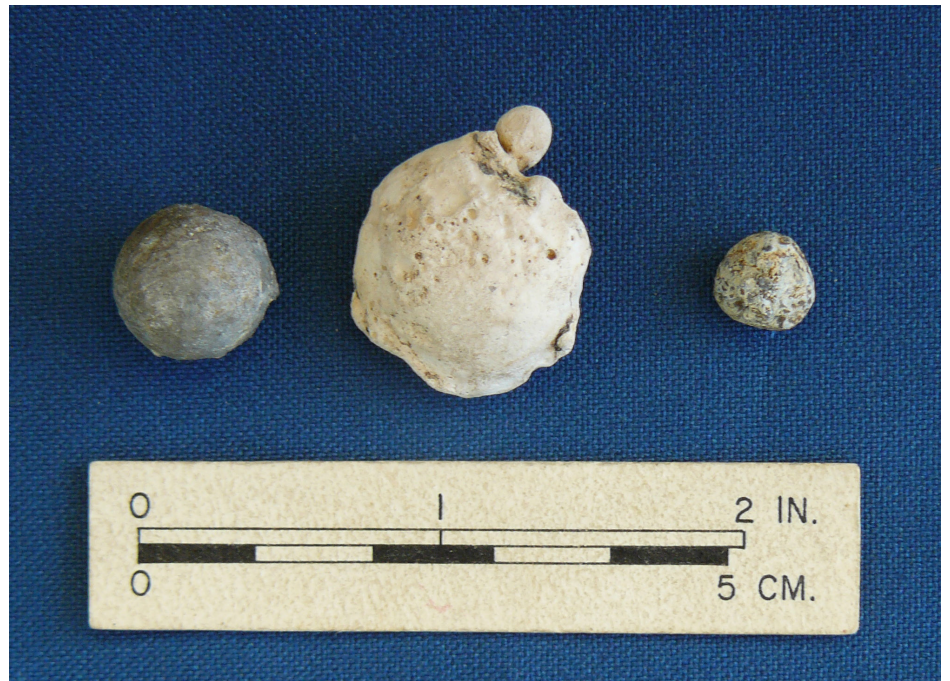


Figure 5: Ammunition artifacts from the Lower Bridge engagement; (Left to Right), unfired pewter rifle ball, fired and impacted musket ball, and fired buckshot. (Photo by James Legg)

trip to visit a state park, see how parks are developed, and take part in a brief archaeological field exercise. On March 30, 2023, the class visited the site, were given a presentation on the importance of the site, and some instruction on using metal detectors. Then we set up blocks for the students to work within, and they conducted a systematic metal detecting survey within the blocks. SCIAA archaeologists Sarah Rogers and Caroline Hall, and Stacey Young, assisted me in instruction and in monitoring the students. After the students left, we covered the same blocks to ensure thorough coverage. Alas, we found no further evidence of the skirmish. If you have read any *Legacy* articles before, you know how they end.... further research is needed. We plan to return to inspect a broader area on the park property and across the river in the future.

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