

### III -- CHOOSING SIDES

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#### "A WARM ENGAGEMENT" AT NINETY SIX - THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE REVOLUTION IN THE SOUTH-AT WILLIAMSON'S FORT

With the courthouse and jail at Ninety Six built by 1773 at the junction of the Charleston Road with the Road to Augusta, the settlement of Ninety Six began to grow around this nucleus, so that by 1775, there may have been a half dozen houses in a row along the Charleston Road.\* By the eve of the Revolution on April 25, 1775, a Committee of Intelligence was created in Charleston:

to correspond with, and communicate to, the inhabitants of the interior and back parts of this colony, every king of necessary information... (Gibbes 1855:107).

Eight men, including William Henry Drayton and Reverend William Tennent, were members of this Committee of Intelligence. Unknown to them at the time, the battles of Lexington and Concord had been fought only a few days earlier, and the members of this committee would soon become involved in "a grand epoch in the history of mankind" (Gibbes 1855:107-09). The news that "the sword of civil war, is ... drawn ... [and] stained with blood!" did not reach the Committee of Intelligence and William Henry Drayton until May 11th, having taken over two weeks to make the journey by horseback from Connecticut (Gibbes 1855:82-91, 107; Drayton 1821:248).

After the news was received there was no general rush to take action. However, on June 14th the Council of Safety, chosen by the Provincial

\*Bruce Ezell has pointed out that most maps show only four roads converging at Ninety Six, with Mills' Atlas indicating six roads in 1820. He states that there were at Ninety Six the Charleston Road, the Martintown (Augusta) Road, the Road to Keowee, Island Ford Road, Long Cane Road, and probably a road to Granby or Columbia.

Congress, began controlling the affairs regarding the dispute between Great Britain and the American Colonies. The Continental Congress shaped and signed "an association ... solemnly engaging their lives and fortunes," which was soon signed by most of the people of Charleston and transmitted into the interior (Gibbes 1855:109-10; Drayton 1821:254-55). The signing of this "Association" was to become the means whereby those in favor of the American Colonies taking a firm stand were separated from those who favored the King. Steps were taken by the Council of Safety on June 26th to insure that the forts held by the King's men were put into the hands of those who favored the American cause. Major James Mayson, with two troops of Rangers under Captains Caldwell and Kirkland, seized Fort Charlotte on the Savannah west of Ninety Six and found "two brass field-pieces, fourteen iron cannon, 6, 4, and 2 pounders--1,750 pounds weight of gunpowder--500 pounds more, somewhat damaged--270 iron shot, for cannon--and a quantity of lead." He then went to Ninety Six Court House, taking with him 250 pounds of powder and 500 pounds of lead, arriving there on the 14th of July (Drayton 1821:317-18). Such actions put significant military stores in the hands of those supporting the American Colonies in any engagement against those favoring the King.

However, Major Mayson was not to hold his powder for long, for not far away were militiamen under Terry, Robinson, and Cunningham who had received a message from Captain Moses Kirkland, one of Mayson's officers at Ninety Six, that he wanted to change sides and would be agreeable to their taking back the powder and lead taken from Fort Charlotte. With this assurance of inside help with their venture, these men rode with 200 horsemen to Ninety Six, arriving there about noon on July 17th. They immediately placed Major Mayson in the Ninety Six jail, took possession

of the powder and lead, and charged Mayson with robbing the King's fort (Drayton 1821:322).

With such actions taking place in the back country of South Carolina, it was clear that not everyone in the area was eager to sign the "Association." In order to counteract any further actions of this kind and to "explain to the people the causes of the present disputes," William Henry Drayton and Reverend William Tennent were ordered on July 23rd by the Council of Safety to go to the back country (Gibbes 1855:105-06). They took with them copies of "The Provincial Association" for the signatures of all those who could be "harranged" into signing (Gibbes 1855:129).

#### The Provincial Association

##### South Carolina

The actual commencement of hostilities against this Continent by the British troops, in the bloody scene on the 19th of April last, near Boston--the increase of arbitrary impositions from a wicked and despotic Ministry--and the dread of insurrections in the Colonies--are causes, sufficient to drive an oppressed people, to the use of arms. We, therefore, the Subscribers, inhabitants of South Carolina, holding ourselves bound by that most sacred of all obligations, the duty of good citizens towards an unjured country, and thoroughly convinced, that, under our present distressed circumstances, we shall be justified before God and man, in resisting force by force--do unite ourselves, under every tie of religion and honour, and associate as a band in her defense, against every foe--hereby, solemnly engaging, that whenever our Continental or Provincial Councils, shall decree it necessary, we will go forth, and be ready to sacrifice our lives and fortunes to secure her freedom and safety. This obligation, to continue in force, until a reconciliation shall take place, between Great Britian and America; upon constitutional principles--an event which we most ardently desire. And, we will hold all those persons inimical to the liberty of the Colonies, who shall refuse to subscribe this Association (Drayton 1821:285-86).

Feelings were running high in Charleston by the second week in August, and those with Tory sympathies were not safe from the violence

of their neighbors, and tar and feathers were resorted to as an inducement for the signing of this document (Gibbes 1855:139). Meanwhile, Tennent and Drayton had found that there was a plot to surprise Fort Charlotte and again place it in the King's service. As to the success of their harrangues, they reported:

We are hemming in the Dissidents on all sides, as much as possible; but their leaders seem determined if possible to bring the people to draw blood, before they have time to be enlightened (Drayton 1821:413).

At the end of August Drayton issued a declaration to outlaw as public enemies all those who took up arms under the defected Moses Kirkland (Drayton 1821:381-82). By September 11th Drayton had established his headquarters at Ninety Six, where he was encamped with about 220 men and four pieces of cannon, which he reported, had terrified the King's men under their leader, Fletchall. Fletchall's men were reported to be planning an attack on Drayton, but this did not materialize. Drayton assured the Council of Safety that he would restore the country to a state of quietude "by eradicating the opposition" (Gibbes 1855:171-73). In preparing for this expected attack, Drayton said:

...the court house was not musket proof--and the prison could not contain a third of our men ... I fortified the prison by mounting a gun in each room below, in each of which I placed a small guard; I lodged the powder in the dungeon. Nothing but setting the prison on fire could force it. In the mean time the body of horse had halted, and I sent Major Mayson to post them in ambuscade at a ford on Saluda, about six miles off. After dark, I marched 100 infantry about a mile and a half from Ninety Six, and posted them to the best advantage in ambush on this side (Gibbes 1855:174).

Tension continued, and on September 17th Drayton reported that his army numbered some 900 strong, and Fletchall's camp contained from 1200 to 1400 men (Gibbes 1855:187). However, there was no battle between the

Tories camped on the opposite side of the Saluda River and the force of Drayton camped three-quarters of a mile from Ninety Six on the Island Ford Road, even though Drayton's men were impatient to be led into a fight (Gibbes 1855:188); (Figure 2). Instead, on September 16th the Treaty of Ninety Six was signed by representatives of both groups which resulted in the dispersal of the forces for the time being (Gibbes 1855:184).

One month later, on October 14, 1775, the Council of Safety appointed Drayton as one of the Commissioners for erecting a redoubt for the protection of Charleston, and he left Andrew Williamson in charge of the militia in the area of Ninety Six (Gibbes 1855:206-07). Williamson reported that "everything seems in perfect tranquility...." However, this tranquility was not to last, due in part to the fact that Robert Cunningham had refused to sign the Treaty of Ninety Six drawn up by Drayton, and so was taken prisoner and put in jail in Charleston. His friends and brother, Patrick Cunningham, sought reprisal for Robert's arrest and seized 1000 pounds of powder being sent to the Cherokee Indians by the Council of Safety through an agreement hoping to insure the neutrality of the Indians in the months to come. This action, plus the fact that Cunningham's force was growing larger daily, prompted the Provincial Congress to send Captains Richardson, Thompson, Neel, Thomas, Major James Mayson, and Major Andrew Williamson, with some 500 men, to intercept the Tory force (South Carolina Library, U.S.C., S.C. & American Gazette, December 8, 1775. Hereinafter cited as SCL and SCAG).

Major Williamson was in charge of the force which reinforced Fort Charlotte with militia and provisions to withstand a possible attack. While there he learned that a Tory force of some 1500 were gathering and planning

to cross the Saluda near Ninety Six. Williamson held a council of war with Major Mayson and all the captains in which it was determined to march against the much larger force. Consequently, on the morning of the 19th of November Williamson's force left Fort Charlotte for Ninety Six with their baggage and provision, arriving with their force of 500 men at daybreak (SCL, SCAG: December 8, 1775; Gibbes 1855:215). Major Mayson described the preparations before the battle:

At first consultation with Major Williamson, we agreed to march and meet the opposite party and give them battle; but, upon consideration, we thought it most prudent to march all our men to Col. Savages' old field, near Ninety Six, as our numbers were small, compared with the other party, and to fortify the same with the rails thereabouts. We arrived there about day break, and in about two hours a square of one hundred and eighty-five yards, was fortified in such a manner as to keep off the enemy... (Gibbes 1855:215-16).

Another account of the fortification which was to come to be known as "Williamson's Fort" is given in a newspaper summary:

...having received certain Intelligence that the Enemy were within a few miles of them hastily erected a slight, square Breastwork of old Fence Rails, joined to a Barn on a Spot of cleared Ground, on which, in proper places, they fixed a few Swivel Guns. On the next Day, and before the Breastwork was quite finished, they were surrounded by about 2000 of the Malcontents, that were led on by Major Joseph Robinson, who sent a Message to Majors Mayson and Williamson, desiring that they and their Men should lay down their Arms, and surrender themselves Prisoners, which was rejected with Disdain. The Gaol, which is about 300 yards distant from the Fort, was taken Possession of by Robinson's Party, who had likewise cut off all Communication between the stockade and the only spring.... (SCL, SCAG: December 8, 1775).

Major Andrew Williamson's account reports on the first preparations and events after their arrival at Ninety Six at dawn:

...and in about three hours erected a kind of fortification of old fence rails joined to a barn and some out houses, which before we had quite completed they had surrounded us with a large body of men

with drums and colors. I then sent out an officer to demand their intention, who on his return reported that Major Robinson and Mr. Patrick Cunningham refused to have any conference but with the commanding officers. I then sent out Major Mayson and Mr. Bowie, whom they sent and Mr. Evan McLaurin met between their men and the fort in sight of both, and after about fifteen minutes conference they returned, and reported that they insisted on our immediately delivering up our arms to them and dispersing; which were the only terms they were determined to grant us, and that at parting they told them to keep our people within the fort, which was the only place where they could be safe; and immediately they took two of our people just by the fort, before my face, whom I gave orders to retake, and a warm engagement ensued, which continued with very little intermission from three o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday, until Tuesday sunset...(Gibbes 1855:218).

A letter from an officer inside the fort provides us with some additional detail from the second day of the battle:

On the second Day after the Engagement began, they (Robinson's Men) set fire to the Fences and old Grass in the Fields all round us, with an Intent to burn up our Fort, which consisted only of old dry Fence Rails, and attack us from behind the Smoak; but the Ground was to wet, and saved us the Trouble of extinguishing the Fire, which we intended to do at any Risk. When they found that Plan defeated, they set to work, and made some Kind of a rolling Battery, behind which they intended to come up and set fire to Col. Savages' Barn, and so burn us up; but this they afterwards dropt, and set Fire to their Engine themselves. Just as they hung out a Flag for a Cessation of Hostilities, it was resolved in a Council of War to make a vigorous Sally about Midnight, and Captains Pickens, Middleton, Robert Anderson, Singerfield and Colson, from Georgia, with twenty picked Men each, were appointed for that Service, and were to attack them in five different Quarters at the same Time. When they went out each Captain was to reconnoitre the Quarter he was to attack, and then his Fire who attacked at the greatest Distance was to be the Signal to the others, who were each to endeavor making one sure Fire, and immediately retreat into what the other Party called our Fort. We have since learned that their Reason for offering a Cessation of Arms was owing to some of our People, who were absent on Furlow when the Affair began, returning to their Duty with as many more as they could raise, and engaging them in some small Skirmishes and harrassing them on the Outside and their learning from a Deserter of us our intended Sally... (SCL, SCAG, December 8, 1775).

From Gibbes (1855:253) we learn that it was John M. Williams who fabricated the machine of "Engine" that had been designed to burn Williamson's

straw, rail, and cowhide fort.

From the account of the officer inside the fort, we discover that there were plans for using the Indians against the King's loyal subjects, and to aid the Indians in distinguishing the Associators from the King's men, the Associators were to wear:

a Piece of Bear's Skin, a Deer's Tail, or a Piece of white Paper wore in their Hats...(SCL, SCAG, December 8, 1775).

The battle continued from Sunday afternoon until late Tuesday, when just at sunset Majors Williamson and Mayson and their men inside the fort noticed a white flag being waved from a window of the jail. A message was delivered by a man carrying a candle, from Major Robinson to Mayson, demanding surrender of arms and dispersal of those inside the fort. This demand was refused and in about two hours the same demand was made in person by Patrick Cunningham, who talked with Major Williamson. It was agreed that a conference would be held on the following day at eight o'clock.

Accordingly, on Wednesday morning Maj. Mayson, Capt Pickens, Mr. Bowie and myself [Williamson] met with Major Robinson, Messrs. Patrick Cunningham, Evan McLaurin and Richard Pearis, and agreed to the cessation of hostilities now inclosed you, which was lucky for us, as we had not above thirty pounds of powder, except what little the men had in their horns; but no scarcity appeared, as no person knew our stock but one gentleman and myself. We had thirty-eight barrels of flour with four live beeves in the fort, and got very good water the third day, after digging upwards of forty feet, so that if we had had a sufficiency of powder we could have stood a seige for a considerable time (Gibbes 1855:218).

Although the 40 foot well was completed and water was found on the third day of the battle, these were thirsty days for the 500 men inside the fort, as witnessed by Major Mayson:

...before three days had expired, our men began to be outrageous for want of bread and water, and we had not above sixteen pounds of gunpowder left (Gibbes 1855:216).



As Williamson reported, it was lucky that the larger force of King's men offered a white flag when they did, for although a water supply was obtained from the well on Tuesday, the powder supply had dwindled during the battle from several hundred pounds, to 30 or less. The number wounded inside the fort was 12 and one dead, with the loss to the army of Major Robinson said to have been "considerable". Greater loss inside the fort was reported to have been avoided due to the blinds of fence, rails, straw, and beef hides of which the fort was constructed (Gibbes 1855:219). More specifics were provided by a newspaper account:

At that time, Majors Mayson and Williamson had nearly expended their Ammunition, a Circumstance they had the address to conceal from their Men. Of our Party 14 were wounded, one mortally; of the Enemy it is known several (some say 52) were killed, and many wounded; but Particulars are concealed: That their Loss exceeds ours is not to be doubted, else why should 2000 Men made Advances for a Suspension of Hostilities to 500, whom they had a few Days before insolently demanded to surrender at Discretion? (SCL, SCAG, December 8, 1775).

Major Mayson reported:

The enemy say they had but one man dead, who is a Capt. Luper, and about the same number wounded as ours; but the best information they have buried at least twenty-seven men, and have as many wounded (Gibbes 1855:216).

The document drawn up at this time to end the three day battle is the South Carolina Archives and is as follows:

Agreement for A Cefsation of Arms between Major Joseph Robison Commander of a Body of his Majesty's Militia now under arms for himself and the Troops under his Command, of one part; and Major Andrew Williamson & Major James Mayson Commanders, of the Fort at Ninety Six for themselves and the Troops therein Under the Direction of the of the [sic] Provential Congrefs.

- 1st. That Hostilities shall immediately cease on both sides.
- 2nd. That Major Williams [sic] & Major Mayson shall March their Men out of the Fort and Diliver up their swivels.

- 3rd. That the Fort shall be Destroyed flat without damaging the Houses therein under the Inspection of Captn. Patrick Cunningham and John Bowie Esquires and the Well filled up.
- 4th. That the Differences between the People of this Dictrict and others disagreeing about the Present Publick measures shall be submitted to his Excellency our Governor & the Council of Safety, and for that purpose each party shall send Dispatches to their Superiors -- that the Dispatches shall be sent unsealed and the Mefsinger of each Party shall Pafs unmolested.
- 5ht. That Major Robison shall withdraw his men over Saludy and there Keep them Embodied or Disperce them as he pleaseth until His Excellency's orders be Known.
- 6th. That no Person of either party shall in the Mean time be molested by the other party either in going home or otherwise.
- 7th. Should any reinforcements arrive to Major Williamson or Major Mayson they also shall be bound by this Cefsation.
- 8th. That Twenty Days be allowed for the return of the Mefsingers.
- 9th. That all Prisoners taken by either party since the second Day of this Instant, Shall be immediately set at Liberty.

In witnefs whereof the Parties to these articles have set their Hand & Seals at Ninety Six this Twenty second Day of November one Thousand Seven Hundred and seventy five and in the sixteenth year of His Majesty's Reign.

Present

Patrick Cunningham  
 Richard Paris  
 Andrew Pickins  
 John Bowie

Jofeph Robinson  
 Andrew Williamson  
 James Mayson

(SCA, Terms of surrender at Ninety Six in 1775: H-2-5)

It appears from the second article of this agreement that the swivel guns were to be surrendered, which was literally the case. However, an unwritten agreement between parties on both sides was to the effect that the swivels were to be returned to Mayson and Williamson, even though they had been surrendered as part of the agreement. This was done on November 25th and they were sent to Fort Charlotte by Major Williamson (Gibbes 1855:216-19).

With the return of the swivels, the first battle of the Revolution in

the South was closed with a 20 day truce. The second engagement would come three months later at the Battle of Moores Creek in North Carolina where Loyalist militia were defeated by a smaller patriot army (Sarles and Shedd 1964:64). This second engagement between Loyalist and Continental forces is often said to have been the first battle since it ended with a victory for the Continentals. The first battle at Ninety Six, however, lasting three days and involving almost as many men as that at Moores Creek, ended with a truce and no decisive victory for the Continentals. It is for this reason, apparently, that it is not considered the first battle of the Revolution in the South, with that designation being assigned by the National Park Service to the battle at Moores Creek. Whether it is officially recognized or not, the fact remains that "a warm engagement" occurred at "Williamson's Fort" at Ninety Six for three days between Loyalist and Continental forces from November 19th through the 21st, 1775; a fact that can hardly be overlooked. Five and one-half years later, Loyalists at Ninety Six would successfully withstand a 28 day seige by the Army of General Nathaniel Greene. In both the engagement of 1775, and that of 1781, the area of Ninety Six was a strong center of Loyalist sentiment.

Bruce Ezell has prepared a list of some of the participants in the first battle of Ninety Six, with the distance and present location of the homes from which the men came. This is designed to show the wide center of interest that Ninety Six occupied at that time.

Richard Pearis	Greenville	60 miles northwest
Thomas Fletchall	Union	" " northeast
Andrew Pickens	Abbeville	22 miles west
Calhouns	beyond "	30/35 " "
Andrew Williamson	Whitehall	15 miles "
Roy Hammond	Augusta, Ga.	60 " south
Robert Starke	Ridge Springs	40 " south

Cunninghams	Laurens County	12 "	north
Williams, Andersons, Saxons		20 "	northeast
James Mason		7 "	north
Moses Kirkland	Saluda	30 "	southeast
Caldwells	Whitmire	40 "	northeast
Roebucks	Spartanburg	65 miles	north
Colsons	Georgia	60 "	west
Gervais	Whitehall	15 "	"
Richard Rapley & Francis Salvador		10 "	northwest

From this study Bruce was able to determine that the Whigs were congregated largely south of the Saluda River and the Tories somewhat north. However, it is interesting to note that the side chosen in this engagement was not necessarily the same one held by these individuals five years later in the full heat of the war.

#### Archeological Implications for the Site at Williamson's Fort

From these accounts of the first battle of Ninety Six in 1775, we learn that the courthouse was not musket proof, implying that it was a frame building. Drayton stated that he mounted a gun in each room below in the jail, thereby implying that there was a second floor. He lodged the powder in the dungeon, clearly revealing a feature that could be located archeologically.

John Drayton's book (1821:389); (Figure 2) shows the location of William Henry Drayton's camp near Ninety Six and the outline of Williamson's Fort. This map was drawn in 1821 using manuscript information of William Drayton dating to 1775, and therefore may be expected to have some errors. However, from this map we can fix the position of the courthouse, jail, and two small structures at Ninety Six, as well as the site of Drayton's camp and Williamson's Fort, using the Charleston Road and other roads and streams as reference points. From this map we know

that Williamson's Fort was built southeast of the junction of the Island Ford Road and that from Savannah to Saluda River. These roads can still be seen today, and from these a general location of Williamson's Fort can be determined. The land west of the stream at the town of Ninety Six is a high plateau on which John Savage had his plantation and on which Williamson's Fort was built (SCA, Charleston Deeds, G-5:376; P-4:461, 467, September 9, 1776). The only archeological clue likely surviving from this fort would be the well dug to a depth of 40 feet during the three day seige, which was ordered to be filled, according to the truce agreement.

Since Williamson's Fort itself was constructed in a few hours, of fence, rails, straw, and beef hides around an area of 185 yards on the side, joined to the barn in Savages' old field, the actual fort outline is not likely to be found. The well, as has been mentioned, would likely be the only identifiable archeological clue. However, if a well is found in the area it might be from the town of Cambridge which grew on the site from the 1780's until 1850's, so positive identification as the well from Williamson's Fort might be difficult. Archeologically then, Williamson's Fort will likely not be identified, and the information we have on it and the events surrounding it will have to continue to be based on documents such as those in the books of Drayton and Gibbes. Interpretation will continue to be an historical one rather than one involving historical archeology.

Bibliography - Chapter 8

Abbreviations Used:

SCA South Carolina Archives

SCAG South Carolina and American Gazette

SCL South Carolina Library

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