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The Camden Battlefield, 1996-2010: A Short History of a Long Project

By James B. Legg

In the spring of 1996, I received a call from Lindsay Pettus of the Katawba Valley Land Trust. He explained that the Trust was in negotiations with the Bowater Timber Management Company to obtain a conservation easement on the site of the Battle of Camden, where the British destroyed the American Southern Army on August 16th, 1780. The Trust lacked a clear notion of where the battle actually unfolded on the present landscape, and what boundaries to request for an easement. The only discernable “battlefield” at that time was a six-acre property that had been preserved by the DAR since the early 20th century, including a monument to the slain Baron deKalb, and a highway historical marker. Based on research I had done in the early 1980's, I proposed boundaries encompassing some 316 acres that I thought would include the battlefield.

The easement-granting process ultimately took several years. Meanwhile, I developed an interest in the remaining archaeological potential of the site. Physical evidence, in the form of artifact distributions, might tie the events of the battle, as recorded in 18th-century documents, to the present landscape. I knew that relic hunters using metal detectors had heavily impacted the battlefield—did enough evidence remain to provide useful information? In 1998, with the permission of Bowater and the Katawba Valley Land Trust, I gathered several volunteers and conducted a four-day metal detecting project on a portion of the battlefield that had recently been clear cut. The results were modest (47 battle artifacts) but sufficient to suggest that a large-scale project would indeed be useful.

By 2000, the effort to preserve the Camden Battlefield had passed from the Katawba Valley Land Trust to the Palmetto Conservation Foundation (PCF). At PCF, Brig. Gen. George Fields (US Army retired) had established a battlefield preservation component, and the protection and interpretation of the Camden Battlefield became one of his primary goals. Several dozen people have been significantly involved in the Camden effort over the years, but George Fields is by far the single individual most responsible for the success of the project. Not the least of George’s talents is his ability to squeeze considerably more work out of his consultants than his budget might suggest would be possible. As he marshaled his forces for a concerted Camden campaign, archaeology was one of the several approaches that George initiated in a multi-disciplinary effort. He asked me to summarize my impressions and make recommendations, and in January, 2001, I replied with an ambitious wish-list of suggestions that I thought would assist in preservation planning and contribute to the interpretation of the site. Those suggestions have since been realized to a degree that I did not imagine in 2001.

Palmetto Conservation Foundation received the first of three Camden Battlefield planning grants in 2001. The first two grants were from the National Park Service’s American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP). For the archaeology portion of the 2001 grant (and eventually all three of his grants), George Fields engaged Steve Smith, Director of the Military Sites Program of the Applied Research Division (ARD) at SCIAA. Steve has been the principal investigator, project manager, and a co-author for all Camden archaeology since then. Steve

Fig. 1: British reenactors on the Camden Battlefield during the 225th anniversary observance, August 16th, 2005. (SCIAA photo by Steve Smith)
and I had worked on several military projects since 1988, and he hired me to assist with Camden. Tamara Wilson of ARD has managed our data and produced our graphics. Our contribution to this initial phase of PCF planning (Fields, Smith, and Legg 2003) was a more formal array of recommendations, together with the first installment of the Camden Battlefield Collector Survey. The Collector Survey was a pragmatic effort to salvage information from the community of relic hunters who had already removed most of the artifacts from the battlefield. We recorded several significant collections, and collected artifact distribution data that would otherwise have been entirely lost. Several collectors donated their Camden artifacts to the project.

In 2003, PCF received their second major grant from the ABPP. Our role in this phase of the project included the preparation of a detailed history of the battle, a continuation of the Collector Survey, a preliminary metal detector sampling of the battlefield, and the synthesis of all three lines of evidence into an interpretation of the site (Legg, Smith, and Wilson 2005). By this time we had a fairly good idea of where and how the battle unfolded on the modern landscape, although there was considerable disagreement among our collector informants. The interpretation we settled on at this stage was strongly verified by the results of the third and final phase of research. In 2005, PCF received their third National Park Service grant, from the Save America’s Treasures program. Our contribution to this phase included updated battle history and Collector Survey components, but the major effort was an intensive metal detecting effort that was conducted intermittently over the course of a year, beginning in the spring of 2006 (Smith, Legg, and Wilson 2009). We managed to accomplish 100% coverage of sample areas totaling about 36.7 acres of the battlefield, and recovered some 1,165 battle artifacts (including those from earlier phases). Each artifact was mapped with a survey GPS reading, and the resulting distributions were in remarkable agreement with our existing interpretation. The collection was dominated by fired and unfired ammunition (spherical lead shot), but also included iron canister balls, buttons, buckles, gun parts, mess utensils, equipment hardware, etc.

While we were involved in our archaeological endeavors, George Fields was busy on several other fronts. With the help of the S.C. Conservation Bank, he managed to purchase the original easement property, and when our Collector Survey work demonstrated that the fighting extended beyond the easement to the northeast, George negotiated the purchase of an additional tract. The preserved property now totals some 477 acres, including the old six-acre DAR tract, which the organization donated to the larger cause. George also began a long-range program to restore the battlefield to its original state. In 1780, it was an open forest of mature longleaf pines. Non-longleaf trees are gradually being eliminated as longleaf pines are re-introduced. One of the initial recommendations I made in 2001 was for the preparation of a large-scale topographic map with a fine contour interval—a very useful tool for planning and archaeology alike. George accomplished this goal with a LIDAR-generated base map with a two-foot contour interval, a map we used to good effect in our 2009 report. Finally, PCF prepared an on-site interpretation of the battle for visitors. This includes a general introduction panel at the parking area adjacent to the old De Kalb monument, and an extensive system of walking trails around the battlefield, with interpretive markers and a podcast system explaining various phases of the battle. The dedication of the interpretive trail on November 8, 2009 could be considered the official opening of the Camden Battlefield. The ultimate disposition of the site is uncertain—it may well become a state or National Park Service property. In any case, the Palmetto Conservation Foundation has preserved one of the most significant unprotected battlefields remaining in the United States, and we are very pleased to have played some role in that accomplishment.

In 2009, I received a grant from the Archaeological Research Trust (ART)
at SCIAA to complete the conservation, photography, and curation of the Camden artifacts, which included our archaeological materials, as well as collections donated by Collector Survey informants. George Fields arranged for the collection to be maintained locally, at the Camden Archives, rather than in state curation. The final act came in March of 2010, when I delivered the collection to Howard Branham, director of the Camden Archives.

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