

Patriots and Palmettos: The Battle of Sullivan's Island

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South Carolina Social Standards

Content Standards:

3.2.1 The learner will describe the influence of geography on the history of South Carolina and the local community

3.2.7 The learner will state the key events and effects of the Revolutionary War on South Carolina and his or her own community.

3.8.2 The learner will describe state symbols through which American values and principles are expressed.

3.9.2 The learner will use maps, globes, graphs, diagrams, and photographs to analyze the location and spatial distribution of physical and cultural features in South Carolina

3.10.3 The learner will locate the physical and human characteristic in his or her community and nearby communities.

4.1.7 The learner will describe the key events and effects of the American Revolution on the new country.

4.6.3 The learner will display spatial information on maps and other geographic representations.

8.2.5 The learner will examine the causes and course of the American Revolution and the contributions of South Carolinians.

8.8.1 The learner will make and use maps, globes, graphs, charts, and models to illustrate and analyze location and spatial distributions of physical and cultural features in South Carolina and the United States.

Process Standards:

Historical Comprehension

The Student will reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.

Historical Analysis and Interpretation

The Student will compare different stories about a historical figure, era, or event.

Geography

The Student will prepare maps to display geographic information – E.

The student will prepare various forms of maps as a means of organizing geographic information – M.

Objectives

- The students will relate the events preceding and at the Battle of Sullivan’s Island.
- The students will analyze two primary documents describing the battle and then compare and contrast the descriptions.
- The students will locate the major components in the battle on a map and compare it to an actual map of the battle site.

Materials Needed

Copy of letter from Edward Hall to his father, Richard J. Hall, 2 July, 1776 (located at the end of this document)

Excerpt of letter from Henry Laurens to his son, John Laurens (located at the end of this document)

Map of Charleston Harbor.jpg

Background History

In the summer of 1775, a British plan was in the making for 1776. The British viewed New England as the seat of the rebellion and thought of it as something of a lost cause. Their plan was to isolate New England from the rest of the colonies and reestablish royal control among the other colonies. At the same time, the British would send a fleet with an army to the South, at the urging of the Royal Governors of the Carolinas and Virginia, to take back the southern colonies. To help with this plan, a new fleet was to be sent from Great Britain, under the command of Admiral Sir Peter Parker. Parker was sailing on the *Bristol*, the largest of a fleet of nine warships, along with thirty transports carrying British soldiers under the command of General Lord Cornwallis. The plan was to meet up with Sir Henry Clinton and his men at Cape Fear on the North Carolina coast at the end of February to give support to a Loyalist uprising to take place in the Carolinas.

The fleet arriving from Great Britain was late, leaving Great Britain about the time they were expected in colonies. Weather was not in their favor and the fleet hit a number of storms on their way across the ocean. The storms strew the ships all over the Atlantic. The first of the ships arrived at Cape Fear in mid-April; it wasn’t until the beginning of May that the entire fleet finally was at the designated point.

The Loyalist campaign in the Carolinas raised an army of about 1500, the majority of whom were Scottish Highlanders, under the command of Colonel Donald McDonald. As they marched to the east towards Cape Fear, the Patriots were alerted to the Loyalists plan. A Patriot army of about 1000 under Colonels Richard Caswell and John Alexander Ellington tried to stop the Loyalists from meeting up with the expected British fleet. As the Patriots pursued the Loyalists, the Loyalist army kept moving east, unable to turn south. As they got close to the coast they finally had to make the southern turn and the Patriots hurried to the site of the bridge over a creek they would have to cross. The Patriot army arrived in time to make preparations and set up their defense on the south side of Moore’s Creek. After the defenses were set, the Patriots tore up the boards across the bridge and greased the wood supports remaining.

The Battle that took place at Moore's Creek Bridge was a huge defeat for the Loyalists who had 700 men dead or wounded and 85 men taken prisoner. The Patriots lost just 27 men. This defeat of the Loyalist army had the British commanders unsure of what to do next. Clinton had promised that the fleet would be back in the North by summer, yet the planned southern campaign had not yet taken place. Sir Peter Parker wanted to make his presence in America known and pushed for a southern battle. He sent men down to explore the coast. When it was reported back that the harbor of Charles Town, the largest port south of Philadelphia, was not well defended and that the fort on Sullivan's Island was not completed, Parker was sure of a British victory. He convinced Clinton to head south to Charleston, take the fort and island, and then return to the North. The British could hold the fort with a small regiment of men and their approach to Charles Town, when they were ready to take the city, would be made much easier by already controlling the fort at the mouth of the harbor. So, the fleet left the mouth of the Cape Fear River on May 31, 1776 and arrived off the coast of Charles Town the next day.

In Charles Town, the word of the Loyalist defeat at Moore's Creek Bridge convinced most that the British would concentrate their southern attack on Charles Town, the largest port and wealthiest city in the Southeast section of the colonies. Charles Town also had a strong group of Patriots, second in ardor only to Boston's. Plus, with a large loyalist faction in the upstate, the British knew that they had support as soon as they subdued the rebellious Lowcountry patriots. With this knowledge, the citizens of Charles Town threw themselves into preparations for the defense of the city and its outlying areas. A fort was to be built on Sullivan's Island, facing the harbor. Being short on time, the Charles Town residents realized that they did not have time to get materials such as brick or stone to build the fort, so they had to rely on the materials close at hand – palmetto logs and sand. The fort was to be a square building with two parallel walls of palmetto logs built 16 feet apart. The area between the logs was filled with sand. At each corner were to be diamond shaped bastions. The fort's construction and its design were the idea of its commander, Colonel William Moultrie. The 2nd Continental Congress sent a leading general Charles Lee, down from the north to lead the defense of Charles Town. Lee's comment when he saw the unfinished fort was one of dismay, it's "a slaughter pen from which there is no retreat." (Gilmer 49)

The British plans were to land the army at the northern end of Long Island (now called the Isle of Palms). The warships would open fire on the fort to weaken it while the army marched down the island, crossed a narrow strip of water between Long Island and Sullivan's Island called The Breach, and attacked the fort from the unfinished rear after it had been under fire from the navy. To prepare, Moultrie had a total of 26 guns at the fort and 425 men. Another fortification was built at the northeast end of Sullivan's Island, along The Breach where Colonel William Thomson and 750 men were waiting with one large gun. The two groups had far fewer supplies than they needed due to the fact that much was taken away for the defense of the city of Charles Town, itself.

On the morning of June 28, 1776, the soldiers at the fort saw the British ships sailing in and knew that the attack was at hand. The two 50 gun ships, *Bristol*, on which Admiral Peter Parker was located, and *Experiment* took their places in front of the fort. Afraid of running aground in the shallow waters off the island, the ships anchored a ways off shore before commencing their firing. In the meantime, the soldiers at the fort started their bombardment of the ships. The British ships were too far back for their guns to do the most damage, and the sand and the spongy

palmetto logs of the fort absorbed the impact of the shells with little damage to the fort. As the British continued to fire on the small fort, three ships, the *Acteon*, *Syren*, and *Sphinx*, sailed toward the harbor with the intent of firing at the unfinished portion of the fort from the southwest. The tide caught these ships off guard and all three of them found themselves run aground on the shoals where Fort Sumter would later be built. The main fire from the fort was aimed at the two 50 gun ships, especially the *Bristol*. The Americans were good shots and their fire did much damage to the British ships. One shot actually blew off Admiral Parker's pants, leaving him "exposed" to all the elements.

To further the mishaps of the British, when Clinton attempted to cross the Breach between Long Island and Sullivan's Island, the British discovered that what they thought was no more than a few feet deep was in actuality upwards of 7-8 ft with treacherous currents and sinkholes. Visitors today to Breach Inlet have the benefit of signs with skulls and crossbones warning against wading at this location. The British found out the dangers by trial and error. Clinton then tried to cross the Breach in flat bottomed boats, but found that the fire from Thomson and his men was too strong and they were suffering too many casualties. At that point, he gave up and the army did nothing more to take the fort.

As the fighting was going on, the residents of Charles Town started a battle tradition by climbing on rooftops of the homes on the Battery to watch the bombardment. At one point, the South Carolina flag – blue cloth with a white crescent moon in the corner- flying on the Southwest corner of the fort, was shot down. Sergeant William Jasper leapt down, out of the protection of the fort, to retrieve it and attached the flag to a sponge staff (a tool that was used to swab out the barrel of a cannon so that any remaining sparks or fire from the last shot would not prematurely detonate the new powder being placed into the barrel.). He then positioned the flag again in a place of prominence. The onlookers from Charles Town were relieved to see the flag once again flying.

As the darkness came, Admiral Parker began to take stock of the damage to his fleet. Most of his ships were damaged, some severely. Of the three ships run aground, the *Syren* and *Sphinx* had managed to free themselves, but the *Acteon* was still firmly planted on the sandbar. The British retreated under the cover of darkness and when the Patriots awoke on the morning of the 29th, they found the fleet withdrawn. The crew of the *Acteon*, after being unable to free her, evacuated the ship and set her afire. Troops from the fort went out and boarded the ship, firing her guns at the departing crew. The Patriots took what they could from the ship until they realized that the fire was quickly heading towards the magazine. They rapidly left the ship and headed back to the fort. Legend has it that all of those who witnessed the *Acteon's* magazine catch fire said the smoke from the explosion rose up and formed the shape of a Palmetto tree. The palmetto tree became part of the seal of South Carolina - the image of a palmetto rising high from a fallen English oak – and was added to the crescent to become the South Carolina state flag.

Gilmer, Georgia Muldrow. Battle of Fort Sullivan: Events leading to the First Decisive Victory. Fort Sullivan Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution. 1976.

Lipscomb, Terry W. The Carolina Lowcountry April 1775 – June 1776 and the Battle of Fort Moultrie. Columbia, SC: South Carolina Department of Archives and History. 1994.

Lipscomb, Terry W. South Carolina Becomes a State: The Road from Colony to Independence. Columbia, SC : South Carolina Department of Archives and History. 1976.

Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the American Revolution. New York: William Morrow and Company. 1991.

Activities

1. Either hand out the Background description to the students to read on their own or convey the information to them.
2. Give them a blank map of Charles Town harbor with Sullivan's Island and Long Island (Isle of Palms) on it. Have the students locate the site of the fort, The Breach (Breach Inlet), the location of the *Bristol* and *Experiment*, shoals on which the *Syren*, *Sphynx*, and *Acteon* ran aground (the current site of Fort Sumter). Students should also locate the city of Charles Town on the map. Give the students a copy of "A Plan of the Attack of Fort Sullivan" to compare their maps to the map drawn just after the battle. Many map activities can be used with this map to determine distances and discuss other possible strategies the British might have used.
3. Give the students copies of the letter from Edward Hall to his father, Richard Hall as well as the excerpt of the letter from Henry Laurens to his son, John Laurens. Have them work in pairs to analyze and interpret the letters.

Let them answer the following questions:

1. According to Hall, what was the ambition of the men at the fort on Sullivan's Island?
to have a role in the upcoming battle "to have a place in the drama was the ambition of one member.
2. How did these men conduct themselves throughout the battle, according to Hall?
Bravely and without cowardice, but with many examples of personal bravery such as Sergeants Jasper and McDonald.
3. Near what part of the fort was Hall located? What event occurred in front of him?
Hall was located with LT. William Capers men outside the fort on the southwestern end. The Acteon running around was directly in front of them and "became a splendid target" for them.
4. Who was "President Rutledge" that with Colonel Moultrie reviewed the troops?
The Provincial Congress adopted a "temporary" constitution to govern the colony during the troubles with Great Britain. This constitution was adopted on March 26, 1776, and John Rutledge was "President" of the colony. In a later Constitution (1778), the position is changed to "governor" and John Rutledge is made the first Governor of South Carolina.
5. According to Henry Laurens, where else were their troops and fortifications besides Sullivan's Island?
Fort Johnson, across the harbor from Sullivan's Island, the city of Charles Town had barricades at all the wharves and ends of streets, and batteries were erected at landings above the town.
6. What was General Lee's opinion of the fort at Sullivan's Island. How did this change?
Lee felt that the fort should be abandoned and the stores taken for better use elsewhere. The battle caused him to change his mind.
7. According to Laurens, what was the last ship to leave the area and what did it do as it left?

The ship was the Active. It went to Bull's Island, property of Captain Shubrick, where men went ashore and killed cattle and took 6 negroes (slaves?). The lack of ability of the British to shoot the cattle well gave Shubrick's overseer something with which to make fun of the British.

8. See if you can find any references to the same events or people between the two letters. Which letter do you think describes the battle most accurately? Why? Can you believe the accounts given here? Why or why not?

answers will vary

9. Which letter describes the events in town more accurately? Why?

answers will vary

Additional Activities

1. Illustrate an event of the battle and be prepared to explain to the class your illustration.
2. Pretend that you were in the city during the bombardment of Sullivan's Island. Write a letter to a member of your family describing what you saw from a rooftop in the city of Charles Town.
3. Make a bumper sticker to commemorate the Battle of Sullivan's Island. Remember that bumper stickers are short and often contain puns or plays on words.

Excerpt from a letter from Henry Laurens to his son, John Laurens; August 14, 1776

(the spelling and grammar are his)

..... the President was as diligent as active as a Man could be & so much more useful than myself as his authority superior abilities & advantages led of youth enabled him. every Man except a few unhappy misled whom the People call Tories & a few of a worse stamp whom I call property Men, was animated, discovered a Love of country & a boldness arising from an assurance of being engage in a just Cause; Charles Town was in a very short time inclosed by Lines Trenches, & Redoubts – Wharves were cleared of all incumbrances. Streets strongly barracadoed – retrenchments within – Batteries erected for defence at practicable Landings above the Town – Thousands of Men came in from the Country from North Carolina & Virginia & all this with a degree of Celerity as amazing as our former neglect had been, much indeed are we indebted to Gen Lee as well as to his seconds the Brigadiers Armstrong & Howe, these arrived at a Critical time & we were favoured by weathered which fortunately withheld the Enemy from striking a sudden blow & every moment of the Interval was improved to advantage on our side.

Gen Lee at first sight was exceedingly displeased with the Fort at Sullivant's wished we could save our Stores & abandon it although he acknowledged the exterior work was impregnable. however as that could not be done, he recommended some amendments gave advice Orders & his presence in the beginning of the action to which if we do not altogether owe but from the General's better knowledge of the Harbour & the vast Importance of that Post he must now be of a different opinion.

At the approach of the Ships of War towards Sullivant's the Ramparts & parapets of Fort Johnson where Colonel Gadsden had chosen his Command were seen covered by Officers & Soldiers, every one Interesting himself in the fate of the Sister Fortress & standing ready in case of need to second her efforts. all the Batteries round this Town were at the same time Manned, Guns loaded every article in readiness for acting in turn, Troops of Regulars & Militia properly stationed for repelling all attempts to Land, Engines & Men at proper stands for extinguishing Fires in the Town – there was every appearance of an universal determination to give General James Grant the flat Lie. it was the fortune of his old friend Will Moultrie to speak first & he monopolized the Glory of the day.

The Country Militia as well as the Town continued cheerfully to do duty on this frontier as long as one of the Enemy's fleet remained in sight – the Active was the last, she with a Tender went about ten days ago to Bull's Island the property of Capt Shubrick landed 40 White & 20 black Men killed by Platoon firing a few head of Cattle, augmented their black Guard by stealing Six more Negroes & then sailed off the Coast or perhaps only a little out of sight. to hear Shubrick's Overseer relate the manner of their firing on the Cattle & the very few of their shot which hit the Mark, is droll enough, & serves to raise the contempt of those, who with single Ball at 150 Yards distance will hit the Circle of an English Crown...

Rhodehamel, John, ed. *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc. 2001.

Letter by Edward Hall

(The following letter was written by Edward Hall, stationed at the westernmost flank of the battle site, outside of the fort, at a gun emplacement under the command of Lieutenant William Capers.

It was found by Hall's grandson's widow and given to the News & Courier who printed it on August 25, 1875. Because of the worn condition of the letter, parts were unreadable.)

CHARLESTOWN, 2^d of July, 1776

To Mr. Richard J. Hall, of St. Stephen's Parish:

My Dear Father: Several weeks have elapsed since I had the pleasure of writing to you, which is attributable to the constant marching and hard work of the 2d Regiment, to which I now belong: (unreadable) But through the kindness of Lieutenant William Capers, the brave and gentlemanly commander of my company, I have obtained four days' leave of absence to see cousin Richard Hall safely in the hospital here. He was one of the only two officers wounded in the great battle on the 28th, having been struck by a fragment of a bomb on the left shoulder and side. (unreadable) But let me tell you something of the great defence which we made at Sullivan's Island or as we now call it, Fort Moultrie. Since the sickness of Capt. Horry our company has been commanded by Lieut. Capers, a good soldier, kind and generous as he was and is brave. We received orders on the 20th of June to leave the "Half Moon" fort, and, by transport vessel, were landed on the west side of the island, where we found the other part of the regiment, commanded by Col. Moultrie, and joined them day and night in strengthening the large work which was being erected. Our work was assigned on the southwest side of the fort, which is built entirely of the palmetto logs, made into the form of pens, and the interior filled with sand. By the morning of the 26th we had mounted two 32-pound cannon, and were so well fixed as to receive a compliment from Col. Moultrie, who, with Maj. Horry, spent some hours inspecting our line, which is an extension of the main work. Never have I seen men work so faithfully. It was evident that we were going to have a great fight, and to have a place in the drama was the ambition of every member of the company. Capt. Laurens and Pickering gave us instructions during the 26th in loading and handling our guns, (they are of the artillery,) but soon found out that our officers, Capers, Dewers and Parker know enough to point a gun. We were all in expectation of an attack by land on the 26th, but the east end of the island was well taken care of by Col. Thomson's regiment. (unreadable) Our constant anxiety was terminated on the morning of the 28th (unreadable) It was evident, from the maneuvering of the British ships, that we were to have hot work. About 8 o'clock in sloop *Thunder Bomb* commenced throwing shells, which fell over us, doing no harm. Shortly after the guns of the fort on our left opened on the *Active*, a large frigate, who sailed up in fair range and gave us a full broadside. This was followed by the others, and for hours it seemed that all the devils from the pit were let loose. All along the fort, on the sea face, from our side and angle our brave men were returning this fire, and it was plain that our shot were doing them great harm. It would be impossible for me, my dear father, to convey to you an idea of this terrible scene, even if I had the leisure to do so. It was not until the enemy sent a portion of the fleet around to attack the west face of the fort that we had a fair chance. One of their large vessels, the *Acteon*, ran aground on a shoal and became a splendid target for us, and we were gratified in having a fair chance to receive and give shot for shot. In the evening it was reported that the British had landed and captured the force under Col. Thompson, and were coming down on us; but this soon turned out to be false report. (unreadable) At night the firing ceased, and we were permitted that night to rest from our labors. The next morning's sun revealed the fact that the enemy had retired. The *Acteon* still remained aground, and was

captured by Capt. Milligan with a boarding party of volunteers. She was set on fire by her crew and burned to the water's edge. It would be impossible for men to have behaved better than did our noble regiment in this battle. I have the pride to say to you that I have not heard of a single instance of cowardice, but of many cases of personal bravery. Sergeants Jasper and McDonald greatly distinguished themselves; the latter, poor fellow, was among the killed. In our company we had but two wounded, Edward Thomas and Stephen Dwight, the former seriously injured by a fragment of a bombshell. (unreadable) Yesterday the regiment was drawn up, in the best regimentals, and reviewed by Col. Moultrie and President Rutledge. After which a handsome standard presented to the regiment by Mrs. Elliott, the lady of Col. Bernard Elliott. The standard was received by Col. Moultrie. You may be assured that where it leads we are sure to follow. Our men are greatly inspirited, and we all feel that we can, under the blessing of Heaven, do much towards securing liberty and independence. (unreadable) My health is excellent. I need some things, but can well forego these at present, since my condition is no worse than that of hundreds in our army (unreadable) I send this by the hands of Mr. Elias Gendron, who politely offers to be of service to me. (unreadable) With affectionate remembrances, your dutiful son,

EDWARD HALL