The Battle of Camden
August 16, 1780

Horatio Gates

The tragedy of the Battle of Camden is that it should never have taken place when and where it did. The American General Horatio Gates, considered the "hero of Saratoga," had taken command of the troops in the South from Baron Johann de Kalb only a short six weeks before the battle. His mission was to clear the British from the Carolinas. Kalb's men were bordering on starvation and exhaustion; consequently, he advised Gates to take a longer route into South Carolina by way of Charlotte, where friends and supplies were plentiful.

Baron de Kalb

Gates preferred the eastern route and ordered his men to march on July 26, arriving at Colonel Rugeley's plantation some thirteen miles north of Camden on August 13. He believed his "Grand Army" to be some 7,000 men. But the actual head count of rank and file soldiers revealed only 3, 052 fit to fight, and two-thirds of these were green, untried militia.

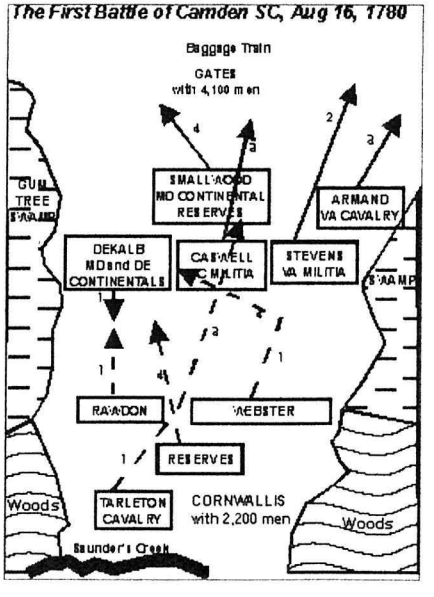
Lord Cornwallis

Lord Charles Cornwallis, British commander of the Southern Campaign, hearing of Gates' movements south, left Charleston, arriving in Camden on August 13. Awaiting his orders were approximately 2,225 redcoats, including some summoned from other outposts.

Planning to surprise Gates with an early morning attack, Cornwallis ordered his troops to form in order of march on the Waxhaws Road at 10:00 p.m. on August 15. Slowly they headed north. General Gates' army headed south at exactly the same time. His point of attack: Camden.

Banastre Tarleton

By moonlight, the opposing troops moved slowly towards each other. At around 2:00 a.m., the van of both armies clashed in the vicinity of Sanders Creek in Gum Swamp. Skirmishing broke out, and lasted about 20-30 minutes. The advance parties pulled back. Prisoners captured by each side confided the magnitude of the situation. Gates, astonished to learn that directly in front of him was the entire British army, determined there was little else to do but fight.



The armies assumed battle formation. A hot, hazy sunrise in the tall pines was soon to be at hand.

At daybreak, the uneasy silence was broken when a band of 50 patriots advanced on the British, who counter-attacked with fixed bayonets and drawn swords. At this, the Virginia and North Carolina Militia panicked, broke, and ran -- many without having fired a single shot. Banastre Tarleton and his mounted British Legionnaires followed in hot pursuit.

Meanwhile, the Delaware and Maryland regiments held their lines, led by de Kalb, whose horse had been shot from under him; and here the British concentrated their attack. The gallant German, who had continued to fight on foot, finally fell pierced by eleven wounds of musket ball and bayonet. He died in Camden three days later. He was buried by the British with full military honors. In 1825, de Kalb's remains were re-interred beneath a monument erected in his memory in front of Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Camden. His old comrade from the Revolution, The Marquis de Lafayette, officiated at the ceremony and delivered a stirring eulogy in memory of his friend.

General Gates covered himself with something less than glory by joining the fleeing militia, never stopping until he reached Charlotte. He was never to live down the disgrace.

The American losses were enormous, with nearly 1,000 men killed and 1,000 captured; numerous transport and ammunitions baggage confiscated. The British lost less than 350 men. For the Americans, this was the most disastrous battle of the Revolution.

In 1954 the Kershaw County Historical Society placed a marker on Flat Rock Road indicating the site of the Battle of Camden. Nearby is a engraved stone monument erected by the Hobkirk Chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution that marks the spot believed to be where Baron de Kalb fell. A bronze plaque states that approximately 2,000 acres of battle site (most of which is owned privately) was designated a National Landmark in 1961.

Currently approximately 472 acres of the core battle area have been purchased. A strategic plan for at least that part of the battle site has been developed by an advisory committee comprised of representatives from 21 private, municipal, county, state and federal organizations committed to the preservation and interpretation of this precious American treasure. Today there is limited interpretation at the site. Walking trails have been installed on parts of the core battlefield along with wayside signage. A podcast of the battle may be download from www.palmettoconservation.org. For addition information on the battle be sure to visit http://www.battleofcamden.org.

Directions
Battle of Camden site

I-20 Exit 98:
Take Highway 521 North thorough Camden. Continue several miles beyond. Take left fork onto Flat Rock Road (just after a "North Central High School" sign on your right). The battle site marker and monument are located 2.2 miles on the right.

Route 1:
Turn onto Highway 521 North at Camden's main intersection of Broad and DeKalb Streets. Follow directions above to battle site.

Battle of Camden, Death of DeKalb. August 16, 1780.
Copy of an engraving after Alonzo Chappell.
National Archives and Records.