THE BATTLE OF HOBKIRK'S HILL

American General Nathanael Greene was in a confident mood the morning of April 25, 1781, as he drank coffee with his officers in his headquarters atop Hobkirk's Hill.

The Rhode Island "Fighting Quaker" had been in command of the Southern Continental Army since appointed by General George Washington the previous December to replace General Horatio Gates. Greene had been waging war with Lord Cornwallis and his army ever since, the most recent battle being the costly battle at Guilford Courthouse in Greensboro, North Carolina in March. Greene was determined to liberate South Carolina from the British and chose not to pursue Cornwallis into Virginia. Instead he marched to Camden, the main British supply post of the interior. Camden was under the command of Francis, Lord Rawdon, a young, accomplished British officer.

General Greene's initial intention was to attack the fortifications at Camden, and he changed his camp several times - first locating at Log Town, situated a mile and a half north of the town, then southeast of Camden at Paint Hill, and finally returning to Hobkirk's Hill. From there he hoped to entice Rawdon and his Redcoats out to battle.

Hobkirk's Hill is a ridge running east and west for about half a mile in the northern part of present-day Camden, with the crest lying about where Greene Street now runs and eastward near Kirkwood Common. In 1781, Broad Street was called the Waxhaws Road (also the Catawba Trail) and intersected the hill through thick pine forests. This road passed through Log Town (Kershaw County Library and Monument Square area), across a swamp (downtown Camden) to the colonial village. On the eastern end of the hill, Pine Tree Creek, fed by Horse Branch and some smaller streams, meanders southward then west of Historic Camden Revolutionary War Site to the Wateree River.

General Greene had reason to be confident. In his moves he had learned that the British had not yet received expected aid from the Low Country. His force of 1,500 was mostly comprised of 4th and 5th Virginians, 1st and 2nd Marylanders, Kirkwood's Delawares, 250 North Carolina militia (who had arrived that morning) 40 artillery and 100 cavalry under the command of Col. William Washington.

Greene was confident his army was superior to the enemy's, and his position atop Hobkirk's Hill was a strong one. His battle lines had been planned and the camp pitched in proper order. Moreover, that very morning, fresh provisions had arrived, including two extra cannons. Greene wrote in a letter that attack by the British was now "an event devoutly wished for!"

After the morning exercises, arms were stacked and the horses left saddled while the hungry troops had their first good meal in two days from the newly arrived provisions. Some bathed and washed their clothes in the nearby streams.

Meanwhile, Lord Rawdon had also prepared for battle. Awaiting orders to head out were soldiers from the 63rd regiment, New York Volunteers, King's American Regiment, Volunteers of Ireland, New York Dragoons, South Carolina Provincial Regiment, and assorted "convalescents." In all some 900 soldiers marched in perfect order and complete silence out the palisade and up the path of Pine Tree Creek. They arrived within a mile of the camp before being sighted by the American pickets, who opened up a volley of musket fire.

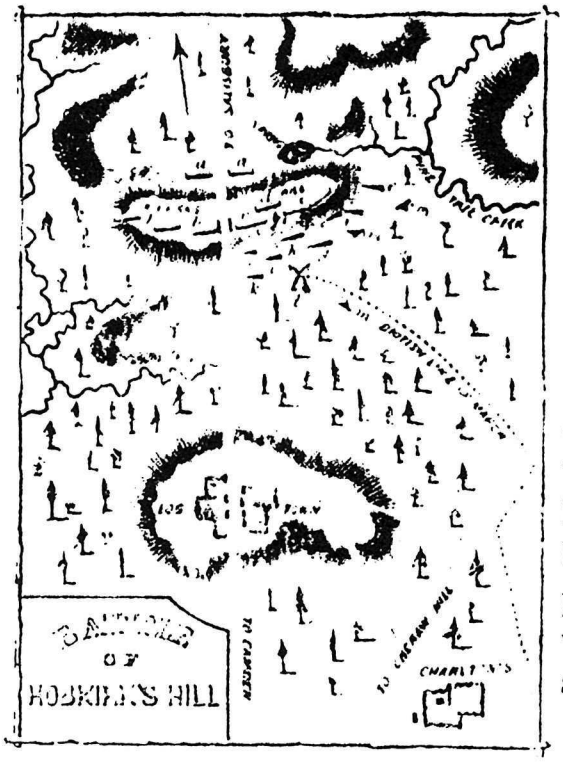
At the sound of the pickets' fire, Greene's men rushed to arms, some partially dressed, some barefooted. The pickets fell back upon the hill, contesting every foot to give the troops time to organize.

The two Virginia regiments formed to the right (Lt. Col. Samuel Hawes, the extreme right; Lt. Col. Richard Campbell, right center). To the left were the two Maryland regiments (Lt. Col. Benjamin Ford occupied the extreme left, Col. John Gunby, left center). The artillery was placed in the Waxhaw Road between the two brigades. Virginia troops under Lt. Colonels Richard Campbell and Samuel Hawes were west of Greene's line, some across the Waxhaws Road. The brave Delawares, heroes of the Battle of Camden, were stationed between the main army and the pickets. Colonel Washington commanded cavalry reserves.

The Delawares fought nobly, but Rawdon reached the Waxhaws Road at about the foot of the Hill. Here he attacked the American center. Greene ordered the end regiments to strike Rawdon's flanks and the cavalry to attack the rear. Col. Rawdon then extended his lines so that his troops could flank the Americans. Even so, the Rebels were forcing the enemy back when Capt. William Beatty, a popular young officer with the Marylanders, fell mortally wounded. Left without a commander, his company wavered and began to fall back in confusion. By the

time Gunby rallied them, the British had seized the eastern section of the Hill. On the west, too, the Americans became partially disordered, but still advanced steadily until Greene, seeing the fiasco to the east, ordered a total retreat.

Washington's cavalry dashed up giving the retreating troops protection from the British advance and assisting Greene in the rescue of the precious cannon. The entire battle had lasted less than half an hour, with both sides suffering around 300 casualties.



The British pursued the Americans about two miles. Briefly halting to refresh his troops, Greene proceeded to Sanders Creek for the night.

The spirits of the Americans were lifted that evening when Colonel Washington, sent back to reconnoiter, drew the small British force holding the hill into ambush and retook the battlefield. General Greene, bitterly disappointed at the outcome at Hobkirk's Hill, would later reflect: "We fight, get beat, rise and fight again."

The badly crippled British army abandoned Camden on May 10th, setting fire to the village as they departed. Greene and his men immediately took possession of the garrison and finished the destruction of the military works.

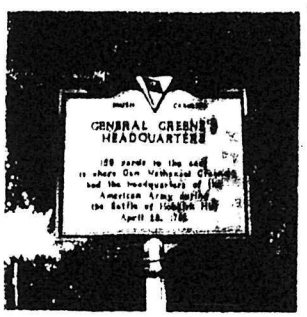
He had a map of the fortifications made (attributed to Thaddeus Kosciusko, the Polish engineer who was with Greene at the time). The map, labeled "Plan of Camden, May 12, 1781," was found in Nathanael Greene papers in 1970 by a researcher, who sent a copy of the map to Historic Camden Revolutionary War Site. It proved incredibly accurate in locating some of the British fortifications and the house commandeered as British headquarter (Joseph Kershaw House), which have since been reconstructed.

Markers designating the sites of the Battle of Hobkirk's Hill and of General Greene's headquarters were erected on Broad Street by the Kershaw County

Historical Society in 1956. In 1957 a stone monument commemorating the battle was placed at the northeast corner of Broad and Greene Streets by the Hobkirk Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. It was later moved to what today is a city park known as Kirkwood Common, which was originally part of a land grant received by John Kershaw, son of Camden founding father, Joseph Kershaw.

John Kershaw laid out a village of 14 lots facing the Common in 1818 and called it Kirkwood, in honor of the brave Revolutionary War Delaware commander. It was instant success, primarily because the town, still located south of York Street, suffered a severe malaria epidemic and "summering in Kirkwood for one's health" seemed a good answer. Initially simple summer dwellings populated the former battlefield. Many of substantial houses seen today were built during the 1830-50s and life in Kirkwood was "lively and pleasant," especially for the ladies, who would "call upon one another" every afternoon or take carriage rides to old Camden.

Sherman's troops ransacked the Kirkwood homes in 1865 but left them standing only to face the hardships of Reconstruction. Many were sold; others slid into a "state of genteel shabbiness." The Grand Hotel era at the turn of the 20th century attracted many wealthy northerners to winter in Camden, some staying as "paying guests" in the Kirkwood neighborhood. Over time, many of the homes were bought and restored to their former beauty by the visitors-turned-residents from the North.

In recent years Kirkwood Common has been designated a city park, four acres of which were given to the City by the William Buckley family. During the Grand Hotel era, the battlefield area west of Broad Street was a polo field for guests staying at the Kirkwood Hotel (razed in 1945). Recognized as both the 2nd/3rd oldest polo field in America and part of Hobkirk's Hill battleground, the property is now under ownership and protection of the Palmetto Conservation Foundation, one of South Carolina's most active preservation organizations.

For additional information: http://www.hobkirkhill.org.