Guilford Courthouse

Guilford Courthouse
National Military Park
North Carolina

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

American cavalry slash into British infantry at the American third line.

The morning of March 15, 1781, was clear and cold. A light frost had disappeared under the first rays of the Sun, but the ground underfoot was still spongy from winter rains and snows. In the damp woods west of Guilford Courthouse, hub of an isolated little farming community on the main road through North Carolina, some 4,400 American troops, in all kinds of uniforms and country clothes, waited for battle.

It was a long, suspenseful morning. About 12:30 the enemy—some of the best regiments of His Majesty George III—in campaign-worn, faded columns of crimson, blue, and green, marched into sight where the road from Salisbury emerged from woods into a clearing. When the Americans opened fire on them from two cannons astride the road, an engagement opened that lasted over two hours—and greatly hastened the end of the war. The generals who brought it to pass were well-matched. Both were energetic, talented, and experienced. But the one who chose the ground lost the day—and the one who kept the field lost the war.

Nathanael Greene, commanding general of the Continental Army's Southern Department, chose the ground. He was an ironmaster by trade, self-taught in the art of war. His opponent, Charles, Earl Cornwallis, now coolly deploying his troops, was a scion of English nobility, a professional soldier and every inch an aristocrat.

A basic shift in England's strategy for suppressing the American rebellion had brought both men from commands in the northern colonies to this field. By 1778 it was apparent to the British high command that the war was stalemated. The rebellion was continuing and even growing, and the rebels had made an alliance with France. In a complete turnabout of military policy, the British ordered the Army to break off the war in the North and throw its full force into a campaign to retake the South. Such a campaign had been tried in 1776 and failed. But, by late 1780, both Georgia and South Carolina were in British hands, and Cornwallis was ready to drive northward through the Carolinas into Virginia. He was set back in October when backwoods militia wiped out his left wing at Kings Mountain. He fell back temporarily to a base at Winnsboro, but by the time Greene arrived in Charlotte, N.C., in December to take over what was left of the American forces in the South, Cornwallis was poised to resume his thrust northward.

Greene was too weak to come to grips with Cornwallis. Hoping to cause his adversary to scatter his superior strength, so he could secure an undisturbed encampment and time to find recruits and subsistence, Greene split his small army. He moved its main body southeast to Cheraw, S.C., on Cornwallis's right flank and sent Gen. Daniel Morgan with 600 men westward to threaten his enemy's left. Greene's risky stratagem succeeded. Cornwallis divided his force into three parts. One he positioned at Camden to watch Greene. Another, under Banastre Tarleton, he sent to attack Morgan. He himself resumed his original course toward North Carolina. It was January 24, 1781, when Greene learned that Morgan had chopped up Tarleton's troops on January 17 at the Cowpens in western South Carolina. Recognizing that Cornwallis would try not only to destroy Morgan but to place himself in position to prevent the Americans from being reinforced, Greene ordered all his forces to join at Guilford Courthouse for a general withdrawal into Virginia where he expected to acquire fresh troops.

Through rain and snow Greene led his foe on a bewildering chase. Cornwallis burned most of his baggage to speed his pursuit, but after three torturous weeks, he found Greene safely beyond the swollen Dan River in possession of all his boats and he himself worn down, hungry, and ill-equipped, 230 miles from his base at Winnsboro. Disconsolately he turned back to Hillsborough, N.C., hoping to raise reinforcements among the loyalists of the region. A few days later, reinforced by Virginia militia, Greene recrossed the Dan. For three more weeks, the armies sparred, seldom over 20 miles apart, their detachments skirmishing regularly. Cornwallis hungered for a general action, but Greene, anticipating additional forces, bided his time. By March 14, with the arrival of new troops, he was ready to attack.

Greene spent an uneasy night worrying that rain might fall and render his muskets useless or that Cornwallis (camped on Deep River 12 miles away) might attack in the night and demoralize his militia. But when the morning of the 15th dawned quiet and clear, Greene, learning of the British approach, laid down his lines of battle.

The courthouse at Guilford stood in a clearing by the "Great Salisbury Wagon Road" (New Garden Road). From it the road sloped westward through woodlands of oak and other hardwoods to Little Horsepen Creek, a mile away. Beyond the creek it disappeared in dense timber. On the near side of the creek, on both sides of the road, lay cornfields a quarter-mile deep, their upper boundaries marked by a zig-zag rail fence. Cornwallis would have to come east on the road to the creek and up through the fields. Behind the fence, backed against the woods, Greene placed the center of a half-mile-wide line of North Carolina militia with skilled rifle companies, Delaware regulars, and cavalry on its wings. In the road he placed two 6-pounders. To the rear of this line, on a slight knoll within the woods, he formed a second line of Virginia militia. About 500 yards behind this line, on an open hill in front of the courthouse, he placed his crack troops, Continentals from Virginia and Maryland, in a large V, with his two remaining field pieces in the center.

The 1st Marylanders were some of the best troops in the Continental Army. They were tough, disciplined, and led by good officers. This private soldier loading his musket wears regimental dress.

ILLUSTRATIONS NPS/DON TROIANI

A British Victory Dearly Bought

The Sun had begun to slant westward when the British advanced from the woods and approached the creek. The fieldpieces in Greene's front line opened fire. For 30 minutes the British answered with their guns. Then, according to plan, Greene's artillerists galloped their guns to the rear. By then the enemy ranks were moving forward. Drums snapping, bagpipes skirling, bayonets glinting, they came at a measured pace across the cornfields toward the rail fence on which a thousand American guns rested. When they were 150 yards from the fence, the militia opened its first crashing round of fire. The British line, with great holes torn in it, staggered but re-formed and continued uphill, stepping over its dead. At musket range, the redcoats delivered a volley, gave a huzza, and rushed at the North Carolinians with leveled bayonets. The Carolinians had been told they might fall back after delivering two rounds and leave the engagement to the second and third lines. Some of the militia got off another round, but many broke and fled, flinging away their weapons. The American flanks held longer, and, as Cornwallis threw regiments against them, separate combats drifted far into the woods.

With the American flanks driven aside, the re-formed British ranks strode into the woods to engage Greene's second line. In the heavy underbrush, their files were broken, their bayonets of little use in the tangled surroundings. Fighting savagely, the redcoats drove through to Greene's last line. There, in cleared fields, the action swayed back and forth, and there, for the first time that afternoon, Greene's cavalry came slashing into the fight. Until now Cornwallis had had the best of it, but suddenly he saw he was checked and in danger of defeat. Attacked from the front and flank by infantry and cavalry, he directed his artillery to fire grapeshot into the American horsemen. This was a difficult decision, knowing that some of his best troops would be trapped in the indiscriminate fire. His cannon fire did its work: the American cavalry charge was checked, the infantry driven back. Then more British units poured from the woods and there was fighting close in. Greene had lost his fieldpieces to the enemy when he got word British infantrymen were working around to his rear. By now he could see that the tide was turning against him. He ordered his regiments to disengage. They withdrew "leisurely" from the smoky field, covered by a skillful rearguard.

As the afternoon turned sharply cold and a storm moved in, Greene marched toward an old camp 15 miles away.

Charles, Earl Cornwallis, short, heavyset, and also afflicted with a bad eye, was 42 in the spring of 1781. Though sympathetic with American political thought, he loyally volunteered for service in America in 1775 and fought with distinction in the North. Adept at politics, he was able by 1781 to ignore his commander in chief's wishes and propose to London war plans of his own. His soldiers saw him as brave, just, and compassionate.

PORTRAIT BY THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH, 1783. NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

Nathanael Greene, a Rhode Island Quaker, proved himself an able, aggressive, and cunning soldier. He was robust and commanding in appearance, though he walked with a tiring limp, struggled against asthma, and suffered from a recurrent eye infection due to a smallpox inoculation when a youth. He was 38 in the fall of 1780 when George Washington handpicked him for command in the South.

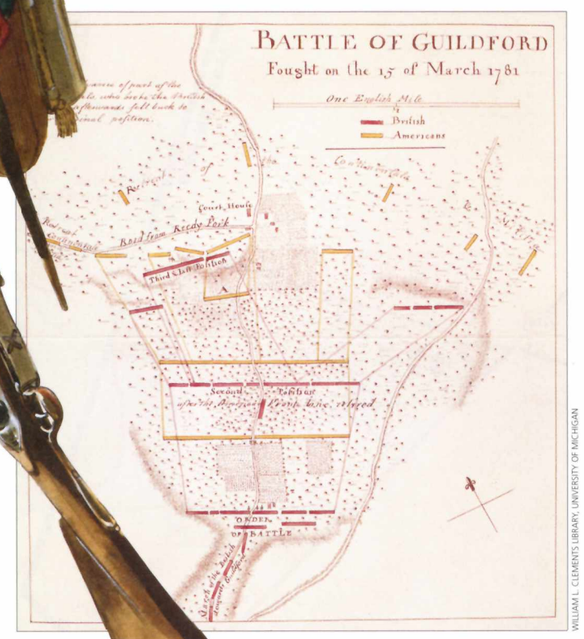
PORTRAIT BY CHARLES WILLSON PEALE, 1783. INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Chilled to the bone, hungry, and exhausted, Greene reviewed the events of the day with conflicting emotions. He was disgusted by the panic of the Carolinians but proud of the way his army as a whole had stood against the disciplined British veterans. He was pleased that his regulars had not run and that Cornwallis had not dared a close pursuit. But as contests at arms are measured, no matter how savagely his army had fought, he knew he had suffered a defeat.

In camp he discovered that he had been more successful than he had dared hope. His losses were relatively light, while those of Cornwallis were overwhelming. This view was confirmed when, a few days later, Cornwallis began a painful retreat toward Wilmington on the North Carolina coast.

Greene shadowed him for a short time before making the crucial decision to move southward and reconquer South Carolina and Georgia. Cornwallis did not follow him. Instead, still obsessed that a conquest of Virginia would assure the fall of all the States to the south, he convinced himself that his garrisons strung across South Carolina could handle the wily Rhode Islander. In April he obstinately set out again for Virginia. He hoped that Greene would be drawn after him. Aware that American troops were assembling in Virginia, Greene left it to them to confront Cornwallis.

These two decisions—Greene's for South Carolina and Cornwallis's for Virginia—set the stage for the final collapse of British power in the South. Greene, using hard-hitting local partisans, brilliantly regained South Carolina in the ensuing months. Cornwallis, committed to an unsound operation, fought through a hapless summer that ended with his surrender at Yorktown, October 19, 1781—seven months after his "victory" at Guilford. Although the war technically dragged on until 1783, its outcome was settled when Nathanael Greene's great adversary in the Carolinas surrendered in Virginia.



WILLIAM L. CLEMENTS LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

This map, sketched shortly after the battle by a British engineer, was submitted with Cornwallis' reports to his commander, Sir Henry Clinton. It clearly shows Greene's advantages of terrain and position. Although knowing little about his foe's numbers or deployment, Cornwallis nevertheless chose to attack.

Touring the Battlefield

Follow the self-guiding auto/bicycle tour road shown on the map below. Walk to Stop 1 near the visitor center, then drive or bike the 2¼-mile road around the park. Allow about an hour for the tour. Foot/bicycle trails at stops lead to features you would otherwise miss.

Be Careful Use caution driving the tour road. Watch for bicycles, and cross carefully at intersections of Old Battleground Road.

1. American First Line On each side of New Garden Road, about 150 yards away, over 1,000 North Carolina militiamen divided into two brigades. They held positions overlooking three muddy farm fields. Greene knew these untested citizen-soldiers were no match for veteran redcoats, but he hoped they would fire a few shots and at least slow the British attack. But when the British rushed forward after taking the first American fire, part of Eaton's brigade on the right side of the road fled, beginning a panic that quickly spread down the line.

2. Fragmented Attack As the rest of the first line dissolved into the woods behind, some of the North Carolinians in Butler's brigade on the American left joined the forces of Lighthorse Harry Lee and William Campbell. These units withdrew to the southeast, taking two of Cornwallis' regiments with them.

3. Sustained Firefight Two brigades of Virginia militia waited in the forest behind the first line. Gen. Edward Stevens, south of the road, and Gen. Robert Lawson, holding the line north of the road, kept up a long fight in the woods until the British broke through to the third line. A foot trail leads to the Greene Monument along the line that Stevens' Virginians defended.

NPS/WILLIAM A. BAKE

This monument marks the graves of William Hooper and John Penn, signers of the Declaration of Independence. Hooper headed North Carolina's delegation to the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1777. Penn served in Congress from 1775 to 1780 and later on North Carolina's Board of War, which helped supply the state's militia.

4. Expanding Battle The monument to Maj. Joseph Winston honors those Surry County riflemen who fought stubbornly under Lee and Campbell on the American left. As Tarleton's cavalry ended this separate fight far to the southeast, Richard Taliaferro, one of Winston's men, was shot; he may have been the last American soldier killed in the battle. Winston and a fellow soldier, Jesse Franklin, later governor of North Carolina, are buried nearby.

5. Battlefield Preservation In 1887 David Schenck and the Guilford Battle Ground Company began preserving the Guilford Courthouse battlefield. Using information then available, they built memorials and marked battlefield locations. Since then, newer information has been used to correct battlefield locations and enhance historical interpretation. The 1909 monument to the American cavalry honors the services of Peter Francisco, William Washington, and the Marquis de Bretigny, a French volunteer fighting for American independence.

NPS

Drums conveyed orders and signals to the infantry. Luther W. Clark carried this drum in the battle; it was donated to the park by the local Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). You can see artifacts from the battle and the war at the visitor center.

6. Guilford Courthouse and the Third Line The battle took its name from the first county courthouse built in 1775 near the Great Salisbury Wagon Road (New Garden Road). President George Washington visited here in 1791. The community began its decline in 1808 when the county seat was moved six miles south. Nothing remains of either the small wooden building standing here in 1781 or the town that was later named Martinville.

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Turner Monument honors Kerrenhappuch Norman Turner. One of her sons was badly wounded in the battle, and she is said to have ridden on horseback from her home in Maryland to Guilford Courthouse to nurse him back to health. The statue shows her holding a cup and towel, her tools of healing.

The trail leads to the hillside position held by the southern flank of Greene's Continentals. British units, farther north, were the first to assault this line. In the low ground in front of this position, part of connected fields that half-circled this area in 1781, British Guards and grenadiers clashed with the veteran 1st Maryland and William Washington's cavalry. On the opposite side, Cornwallis' order to his artillery to fire into the American horsemen stopped them but inflicted casualties on his own Guards.

7. The British Soldier Frequent firefights in the woods and gullies slowed the British army as it fought toward the American Third Line. Trails take you to many monuments; one honors a British officer killed in the Third Line fighting. Other trails lead to New Garden Road and the American Third Line.

8. Greene Monument This trail leads to the Greene Monument, the most impressive in the park. Historic New Garden Road, the axis of the battle, divided the Virginia militia that held the woods on the American Second Line. On this side of the road British Gen. James Webster's infantry struck Gen. Robert Lawson's brigade, breaking through after turning its northern flank.

Colonial Heritage Center This site on New Garden Road preserves part of the Joseph Hoskins farmstead, where Cornwallis' troops formed for battle. Hoskins had left Pennsylvania after his farm suffered damages during the Philadelphia campaign. Exhibits in the Colonial Heritage Center and historic buildings depict life before, during, and after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse.

NPS

Powder horn used by a Virginia militiaman in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse.

Planning Your Visit

Getting Here Guilford Courthouse National Military Park is six miles north of downtown Greensboro, NC, off US 220 on New Garden Road.

Visitor Center Information, exhibits, film, animated battle map program, activity schedules, and bookstore. Open seven days a week. This schedule can change; check the park website or call for updates. Closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

Your Tour Follow the signs for self-guiding tours by car, bicycle, or on foot. You can buy a narrated tour of the battlefield in the bookstore. Colonial Heritage Center, west of the park, has historic buildings and exhibits on civilian life at the time of the battle.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information, check at the visitor center, call, or visit our website.

Safety/Regulations *Remember, your safety is your responsibility.* Do not climb on cannon or monuments. • Pets must be leashed and attended at all times. • Watch out for ticks, poison ivy, and wildlife. • Bicycles are permitted only on the battlefield tour road and in parking areas. • For firearms and other regulations check the park website. • Do not disturb plants, animals, or natural or historical features; all are protected by federal law. **Emergencies call 911.**

More Information
Guilford Courthouse National Military Park
2332 New Garden Road
Greensboro, NC 27410
336-288-1776
www.nps.gov/guco

National Park Foundation
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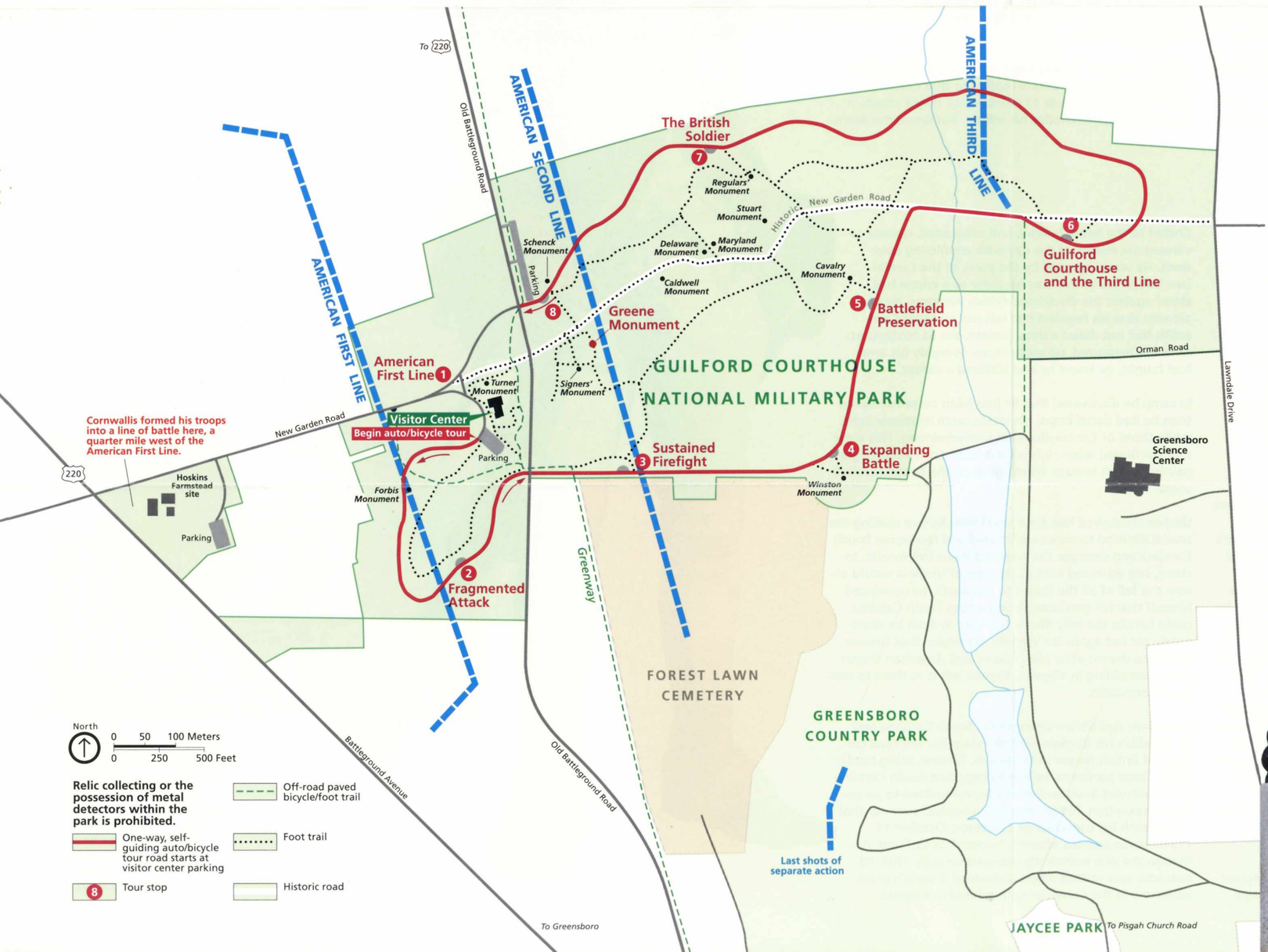

The battle was long, obstinate, and bloody. We were obliged to give up the ground and lost our artillery, but the enemy have been so soundly beaten that they dare not move towards us since the action, notwithstanding we lay within ten miles of him for two days. Except the ground and the artillery, they have gained no advantage. On the contrary, they are little short of being ruined. —Nathanael Greene

Nathanael Greene's statue (near stop 8) honors the strategist of the Southern Campaign. As early as 1848, local citizens wanted to raise a monument to Greene. Congress funded a monument in 1911, and it was unveiled in 1915.

Francis H. Packer, a student of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, created the statue.

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