

Cover: American militia at the rail fence loses its first round of fire. Illustrated by Don Troiani.

Guilford Courthouse

About Your Visit

The visitor center stands near the American First Line. Exhibits and a film program there help explain the battle. Information concerning special activities and seasonal programs can be obtained at the visitor center or by contacting the superintendent. Groups can receive special services by making arrangements with the superintendent. Follow this sign  for a self-guiding auto tour.

Administration

Guilford Courthouse National Military Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O. Box 9806, Greensboro, NC 27408, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Military Park, North Carolina

The morning of March 15, 1781, was clear and cold. A light night frost had disappeared under the first rays of the sun, but the ground underfoot was still soft and spongy from long winter rains and snows. In the damp woods west of Guilford Courthouse, hub of an isolated little farming community in the wilderness on the main north-south road through North Carolina, some 4300 American troops, in all kinds of uniforms and country clothes, waited for battle.

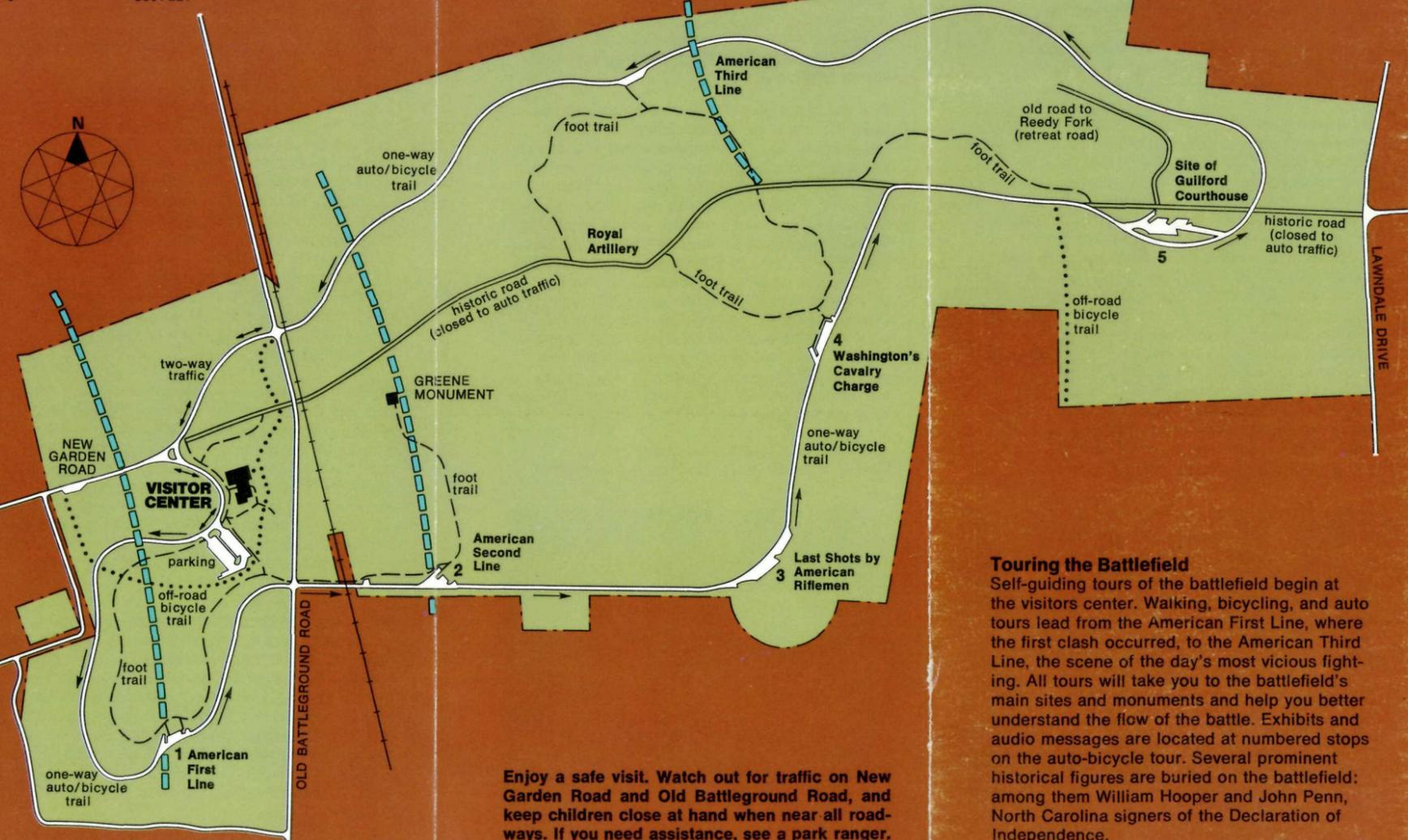
It was a long, suspenseful morning. About 1:30 the enemy—some of the best regiments of His Majesty George III—in campaign-worn, faded columns of crimson, blue, and green, marched into sight where the road from Salisbury emerged from woods into a clearing. They had come 12 miles on empty bellies, because their commander had routed them out before breakfast and hurried them along the muddy, red clay road. When the Americans opened fire on them from two 6-pounders astride the road, an engagement opened that lasted more than 2 bloody hours—and greatly hastened the end of the American Revolution. 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.

The ground had been chosen by Nathanael Greene, commanding general of the Continental Army's Southern Department. A Rhode Island Quaker, who in 1773 had been put "from under the care of the Meeting" for attending a military parade, he had become, 21 months later, the army's youngest brigadier. He was an ironmaster by trade. His knowledge of soldiering had come entirely from wide reading in the military classics and from brief service as a militiaman. But in this war he had proved himself an able, aggressive, and cunning officer and, as Quartermaster General, a capable, though not always diplomatic, administrator. He was robust and commanding in appearance, although he walked with a tiring limp, struggled against asthma, and suffered from a recurrent eye infection got from a smallpox inoculation when a youth. In the fall of 1780, George Washington, Continental Army commander in chief, had handpicked him at the age of 38 for command in the South.

His opponent, Charles Earl Cornwallis, now coolly deploying his troops, was a scion of English nobility, a thoroughly professional career soldier, and every inch an aristocrat. After Eton, while still a youth of 17, he joined the British Army. Schooled at the famous military academy at Turin, he fought on the Continent and served in the House of Lords. Although of Whiggish disposition and sympathetic with American political thought, in 1775 he loyally volunteered for service in America. He fought with distinction at Long Island, was roundly out-generaled by Washington in New Jersey, but did well at Brandywine and Monmouth. Adept at politics, he had made himself secure enough by 1781 to ignore at will his commander in chief's wishes and to propose to the home government war plans of his own. His soldiers, however, saw him as brave, just, and compassionate. He was 42 this early spring, somewhat short, heavyset and, curiously enough, also afflicted with a bad eye, which he got in a sports accident at Eton.

A basic shift in England's strategy for suppressing the American rebellion had brought both men from commands in the Northern colonies to the South and to this fateful field. By 1778 it was apparent to the British high command that its efforts to smother the rebellion had reached a stalemate. After 3 years it found itself facing not only a continuing rebellion but also a new alliance between the rebels and the powerful French. The Crown, in a complete turnabout of military policy, ordered its command in America to abandon efforts to subjugate the northern colonies and to throw its full force into a campaign to retake the South. Such a campaign had been tried in 1776 and failed, but by the fall of 1780 both Georgia and South Carolina were firmly in British hands. And Cornwallis, British field commander in the South, eager to get on with the business of conquest, had started a drive northward through the Carolinas into Virginia. He received a shocking setback in October when American militia decimated his left wing at Kings Mountain, S.C. He fell back temporarily to a strong base at Winnsboro, but by the time Greene arrived in Charlotte, N.C.,

0 150 METERS
0 500 FEET



Enjoy a safe visit. Watch out for traffic on New Garden Road and Old Battleground Road, and keep children close at hand when near all roadways. If you need assistance, see a park ranger.

Touring the Battlefield

Self-guiding tours of the battlefield begin at the visitors center. Walking, bicycling, and auto tours lead from the American First Line, where the first clash occurred, to the American Third Line, the scene of the day's most vicious fighting. All tours will take you to the battlefield's main sites and monuments and help you better understand the flow of the battle. Exhibits and audio messages are located at numbered stops on the auto-bicycle tour. Several prominent historical figures are buried on the battlefield: among them William Hooper and John Penn, North Carolina signers of the Declaration of Independence.



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 lead His Lordship to scatter his superior strength, thus securing for himself a short undisturbed encampment where he might find recruits and subsistence, Greene split his small army. He moved its main body southeastward to Cheraw, S.C., on Cornwallis' right flank and sent Gen. Daniel Morgan with 600 men westward to threaten his enemy's left.

Greene's risky strategem succeeded: Cornwallis divided his force into three parts. One he positioned at Camden to watch Greene. Another, under Col. Banastre Tarleton, he sent to attack Morgan. And he himself resumed his original course toward North Carolina.

It was January 24, 1781, when Greene in his camp at Cheraw learned that on the 17th Morgan had chopped up Tarleton's troops at a place called the Cowpens on the western border of South Carolina, but now was retreating rapidly from Cornwallis' front. Recognizing that Cornwallis would try not only to destroy Morgan but also to place himself between Greene and Virginia, whence he knew Greene expected fresh troops, Greene ordered all his force to junction at Guilford Courthouse for a general withdrawal into Virginia.

Through freezing rain and snow, Greene led his foe a bewildering chase. Cornwallis burned his baggage to speed his pursuit, but at the end of 3 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 refit and to raise reinforcements among the Loyalists of the region.

A few days later, reinforced by Virginia militia, Greene recrossed the Dan. For 3 more weeks, the armies sparred, seldom more than 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 from Virginia, North Carolina, and the frontier, he was ready. Taking a position at Guilford, which he had recognized as favorable ground during his retreat, he invited Cornwallis to attack. Cornwallis that day was encamped some 12 miles away at "The Quaker's meeting" on Deep River.

Greene spent an uneasy night, worrying that rain might fall and render his muskets useless or that Cornwallis might attack in the night and demoralize his militia and green regulars. But when the morning of the 15th dawned quiet and clear he laid down his lines of battle.

The courthouse at Guilford stood alone in a high clearing hard by the "Great Road." From it the road sloped westward through woodlands of oak and pine to Little Horsepen Creek, a mile away. Beyond the creek it turned sharply upward to disappear in dense timber. On the near side of the creek, on both sides of the road, lay fallow cornfields a quarter-mile deep, their upper boundaries marked by a zigzag rail fence. Cornwallis would have to come east on the road to the creek and up through the cornfields.



American cavalry slashes into the elite British Brigade of Guards in the critical action at Greene's third line.

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 horse on its wings. In the road he placed two 6-pounders. Three hundred and fifty yards to the rear of this line, on a slight knoll within the woods he formed a second line of Virginia militia. About an equal distance behind this line, on an open hill in front of and northwest of the courthouse, he placed his crack troops, Continentals from Virginia and Maryland, in a large V, with his two remaining fieldpieces in the center.

The sun had begun to slant westward when the British advance came from the woods and approached the creek. The fieldpieces in Greene's front line opened fire. For 20 minutes the British answered with little 3-pounders. Then, according to plan, Greene's artilleryists galloped their guns to the rear.

By then the enemy ranks were moving forward. Drums snapping, bagpipes skirling, bayonets glinting, they came at the deliberate pace of professionals—a measured 80 paces per minute—across the quarter-mile of open muddy cornfields toward the rail fence on which a thousand American guns rested. When they were 150 yards from the fence, the militia loosed its first crashing round of fire. The British line, with great holes torn in it, staggered, but reformed and continued its dogged march uphill, stepping over its dead. At musket range, the redcoats delivered a volley, gave a blood-curdling 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 most broke and fled, flinging away rifles,

knapsacks, and canteens. 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 reformed British ranks strode into the woods to engage Greene's second line. In the heavy underbrush, their files were broken, their bayonets were of little use and their muskets a poor match for hidden American rifles. But, fighting savagely, the stubborn redcoats drove through to Greene's last line. There, in cleared fields, the action swayed evenly 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. From the road he directed his artillery to fire grapeshot into the struggling melee on friend and foe alike.

Firing into his own troops as well as into his enemy's was a harsh decision for a humane commander, but Cornwallis wanted this day at any cost. His slaughterous cannonfire did its work; the American cavalry's 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 was satisfied he had brutally mauled Cornwallis' army, but the tide was turning against him. He ordered his regiments to disengage. They withdrew "leisurely" from the smoky field, covered by a skillful rear guard. Far to the American left the last ragged crackle of musketry died away.

The afternoon had turned sharply cold, and now as a storm moved in from the northwest,

the sky darkened. Three miles from the field Greene halted his army long enough for stragglers to come up. As rain pelted down, he marched into the night toward an old, safe camp at Troublesome Creek, 15 miles away.

They moved slowly through the mud, that weary army. General Greene, hunched in his surtout, chilled to the bone, hungry and exhausted, reviewed the events of the day with conflicting emotions. He had seen lying on the field at Guilford enough uniformed bodies in postures of pain and death to know that he had cut up the enemy cruelly. He could not tell yet how severe were his own losses. He was disgusted by the panic of the Carolinians, but he was proud of the way his army as a whole had stood against the tough, disciplined British veterans. He rued the surrender of his fieldpieces, but he was pleased that, in the end, his regulars had not run and that Cornwallis had not dared a close pursuit. But, withal, he told himself, as contests at arms are measured, no matter how savagely his army had fought, he had suffered a defeat.

It was almost morning when his army reached Troublesome Creek. As reports came in, he discovered that he had been more successful than he had dared hope. Though his militia was largely scattered and his army bruised, his losses had been relatively light, while those of Cornwallis had been overwhelming. These optimistic reports were confirmed when, a few days later, after caring for the wounded of both armies, Cornwallis began a slow, painful retreat toward Wilmington on the North Carolina coast.

Greene pulled up from Troublesome Creek and for a short time shadowed him. Then Greene made the crucial decision to move southward and reconquer South Carolina and Georgia. Cornwallis did not follow him. Instead, still irrationally obsessed by the belief that a conquest of Virginia would assure reduction of all the States to the south, he convinced himself that his garrisons strung across South Carolina could handle the Quaker general and, in April, he obstinately set out again for Virginia. He hoped that Greene would be drawn after him, but Greene, aware that American troops were assembling in Virginia, left it to them to confront Cornwallis.

These two decisions—Greene's for South Carolina and Cornwallis' for Virginia—set the stage for the final collapse of British power in the South and for the end of the long, hardfought war. For as Greene, using hard-hitting local partisans, brilliantly regained South Carolina in the ensuing months, Cornwallis, committed to an utterly unsound operation, fought through a hapless summer that ended with his surrender at Yorktown, October 19, 1781—seven months after his "victory" at Guilford.

When news of Guilford first reached England, Sir Horace Walpole, British wit and commentator, remarked that Cornwallis' "victory" boded ultimate defeat for the British in America. "Lord Cornwallis has conquered his troops out of shoes and provisions, and himself out of troops." Sir Horace's observation was prophetic: although the war technically dragged on until 1783, its outcome was settled when Nathanael Greene's great adversary in the Carolinas surrendered in Virginia.

George F. Scheer

