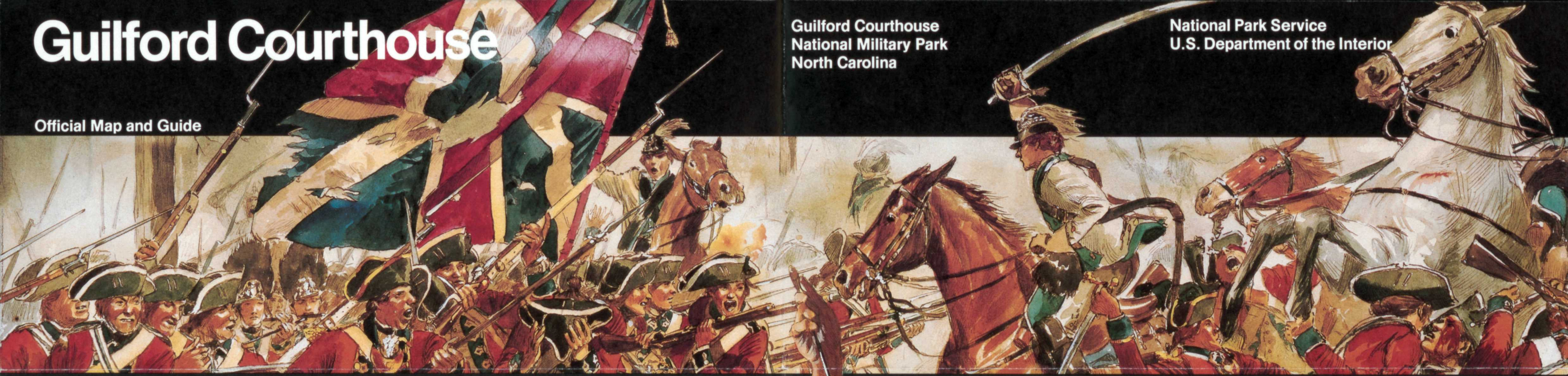
Guilford Courthouse

Official Map and Guide

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.

A British Victory Dearly Bought

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 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. When the Americans opened fire on them from two cannons astride the road, an engagement opened that lasted more than 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.

The ground had been chosen by Nathanael Greene, commanding general of the Continental Army's Southern Department. He was an iron-master 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 Crown 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 it 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 lead his adversary to scatter his superior strength, thus securing for himself 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' 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 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 on the 17th Morgan had chopped up Tarleton's troops at the Cowpens in western South Carolina. Recognizing that Cornwallis would try not only to destroy Morgan but also 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 rain and snow, Greene led his foe a bewildering chase. Cornwallis burned most of his baggage to speed his pursuit, but at the end of 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 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, he was ready to attack.

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

Drawings by Don Troiani

Greene spent an uneasy night worrying that rain might fall and render his muskets useless or that Cornwallis (camped on Deep River twelve miles away) might attack in the night and demoralize his militia and green regulars. 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 alone in a clearing 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 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 horse 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 fieldpieces in the center.

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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 got from a smallpox inoculation when a youth. He was 38 in the fall of 1780 when George Washington handpicked him for command in the South.

Cornwallis, short, heavyset, and also afflicted with a bad eye, was 42 this spring. 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, however, saw him as brave, just, and compassionate.

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 3-pounders. 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.

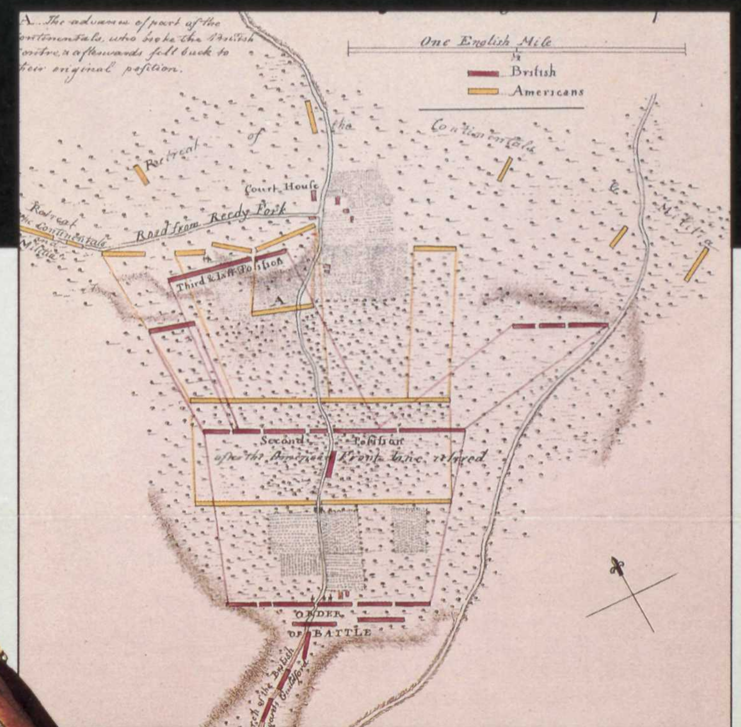
With the American flanks driven aside, the reformed British ranks strode into the woods to engage Greene's second line. In the heavy underbrush, their files were broken, their bayonets of little use in the tangled surroundings. Fighting savagely, the redcoats drove through to Greene's last line. There, 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. From the road he directed his artillery to fire grapeshot into the melee on friend and foe alike. Firing into his own troops was a harsh decision but necessary to save his army. 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. 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 for a short time shadowed him, 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 Quaker general. 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. For as 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.



Banastre Tarleton, Cornwallis' dragoon commander, published this map of the battle in his 1787 memoirs. It clearly shows Greene's advantages of terrain and position. The American first line—held by militia—looked across cleared fields. Behind them 350 yards, in dense forest discouraging alike to cavalry and infantry formations, stood a second line of Virginia militia. Five hundred yards farther on, the advancing British ran into Greene's Continentals deployed along the brow of a hill to the left of the New Garden Road. Knowing little about his foe's numbers or deployment, Cornwallis nevertheless chose to attack.

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Twenty-eight monuments commemorating a variety of persons and causes dot the battlefield. One of the most imposing memorials is the American Third Line Monument, a tall granite shaft that marks the position of Greene's Continentals. Erected in 1910, it bears only the simple inscription "Regulars, Greene's 3rd Line."

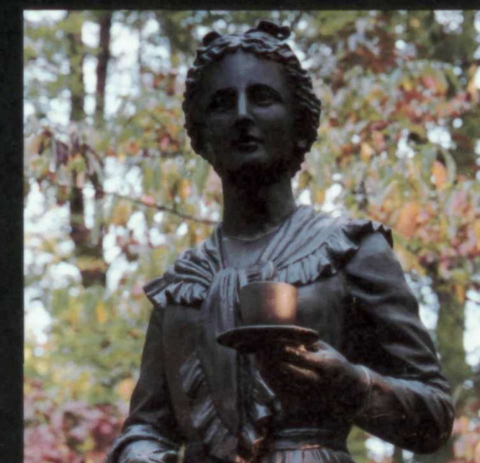
Drums conveyed orders and signals to the infantry. In the din of battle, their sound carried better than the human voice. This drum measures 15 inches in diameter and 18 inches high. According to tradition, it was used during the Revolutionary War. Donated by the local DAR, it is on exhibit at the park.

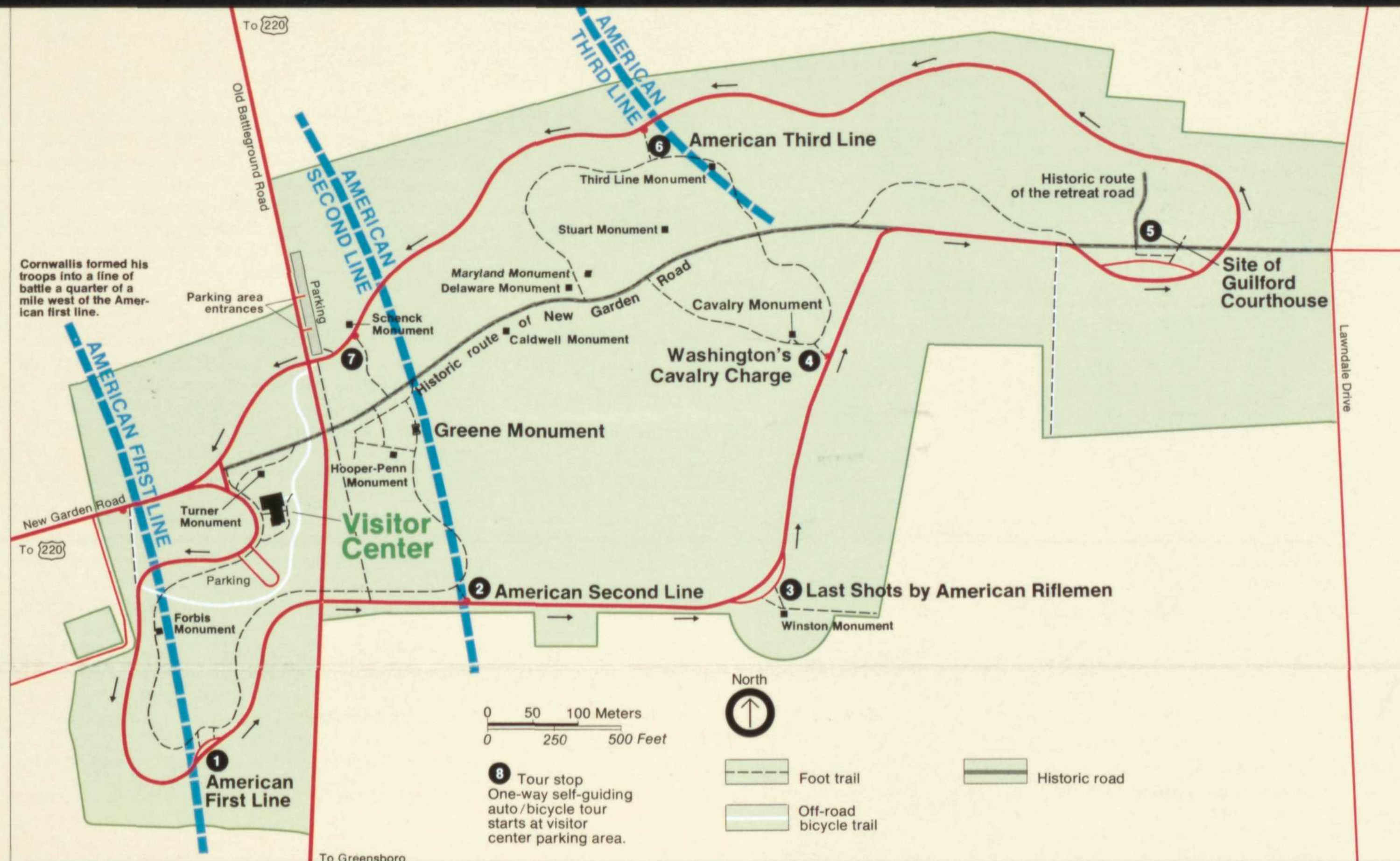
The Hooper-Penn Monument marks the graves of William Hooper and John Penn, two of the State's signers of the Declaration. Hooper, an orator of some repute, headed the North Carolina delegation to the Continental Congress from 1774-77. John Penn served in Congress from 1775 to 1780 and later was a member of the N.C. Board of War, which helped supply the State's militia.

The Cavalry Monument commemorates the dramatic charge of American cavalry against the British Brigade of Guards at a critical moment in the fighting along the third line. Three names are inscribed on the shaft: Col. William Washington; the Marquis de Bretigny, a French volunteer in America's service; and Peter Francisco, who fought valiantly in the action.

The Stuart Monument commemorates a British soldier killed in the battle. Col. James Stuart of the Queen's Guards fell here in hand-to-hand fighting with an officer of the 1st Maryland Regiment. The spot was identified in 1866 when a sword with Stuart's escutcheon on the blade was plowed up.

The Turner Monument pays tribute to 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 this loving woman holding a cup and towel, her tools of healing.





"Never did an army labour under so many disadvantages as this; but the fortitude and patience of the officers and soldiery rise superior to all difficulties. We have little to eat, less to drink, and lodge in the woods in the midst of smoke. Indeed, our fatigue is excessive. . . . Our army is in good spirits, but the militia are leaving us in great numbers to return home to kiss their wives and sweethearts."
—Nathanael Greene, March 18, 1781

"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

The large equestrian statue of Nathanael Greene, which stands near the visitor center, is a fitting monument to the general who was the strategist of the Southern Campaign. "We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again," said Greene of that war within a war. As early as 1848 local citizens were thinking of raising a monument to Greene's memory. After some efforts over the decades, Congress in 1911 appropriated money for a monument. The commission went to Francis H. Packer, a student of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the American realist. The present monument was unveiled on July 3, 1915.

Photograph by Griffin-Lusk Studios

Touring the Battlefield

The best way to see the park is by taking the self-guiding auto/bicycle tour traced on the map above. The principal sites are described below. The road around the park is 2¼ miles long; allow about an hour for the drive, depending on your interest. Foot trails lead from most turnouts to many features you would otherwise miss.

1. American First Line A thousand Carolinians, posted behind rail fences overlooking freshly plowed fields, held this line. Though Greene knew these untested militia were no match for veteran redcoats, he hoped they would get off a few shots each and at least slow the British attack. But when the British rushed forward after taking the first American fire, the militia fled. "Light-Horse Harry" Lee described the scene: "To our infinite distress and mortification, the North Carolina militia took to flight, a few only of Eaton's brigade excepted, who clung to the militia under Campbell which, with the Legion, manfully maintained their ground. Every effort was made by . . . the officers of every grade to stop this unaccountable panic, for not a man of the corps had been killed or even wounded. . . . All was vain; so thoroughly confounded were these unhappy men that, throwing away arms, knapsacks, and even canteens, they rushed like a headlong torrent through the woods."

2. American Second Line Gen. Edward Stevens' brigade of Virginia militia made the British pay dearly for this ground. The brigade holding the line on the other side of the road broke in the face of bayonets. A foot trail leads to the Greene Monument along the line that Stevens defended.

3. Last Shots by American Riflemen The monument to Maj. Joseph Winston honors those Surry County riflemen who fought stubbornly under "Light-Horse Harry" Lee and William Campbell on the American left. As this separate fight was ending far to the southeast, one of Winston's men, Richard Taliaferro, was shot; he may have been the last American soldier killed in the battle. Winston and a fellow soldier, Jesse Franklin, are buried nearby.

4. Washington's Cavalry Charge The open field in the valley below was the arena for some of the battle's most savage fighting. From this hill Col. William Washington's dragoons and mounted militia charged the rear of the British 2d Guards. The dragoons pounded through the Guards, swords flashing, then turned and rode through again, scattering the enemy, who were then hit before they could regroup by Maryland Continentals. A militiaman described the charge: "Leaping a ravine, the swords of the horsemen were upon the enemy, who were rejoicing in victory and safety; and before they suspected danger, multitudes lay dead." In this action, the young giant Peter Francisco, swinging a 5-foot saber, alone felled 11 British before falling wounded himself. The foot trail leads to the hill from which Cornwallis directed his artillery to fire into the melee between the Guards and the Marylanders.

5. Site of Guilford Courthouse The courthouse for which the battle was named was built in 1775 at the intersection of the historic road and the retreat road. About 100 persons lived in the community. The courthouse was abandoned in 1808 when the county seat was moved 6 miles south. Nothing remains of either the small wooden courthouse or the community here in 1781.

6. American Third Line The trail follows the line held by the Continentals. The British left flank repeatedly assaulted this line from across the open field. It was here that the British Guards clashed with the 1st Maryland. To save the Guards, Cornwallis ordered his artillery to fire into the melee, cutting down both his own men and the enemy. The reproduction cannon on the field represent the four 6-pounders used by Greene's artillery, which were captured during the withdrawal. The trail continues along the historic road to the Delaware and Maryland monuments, returning along the British left flank.

7. Greene Monument The trail at this stop leads to the Greene Monument, the most impressive one in the park. The historic road, the axis of the battle, divided the two brigades of Virginia militia that held the American second line. The right brigade, commanded by Gen. Robert Lawson, broke in the face of repeated British attacks. The brigade on the left flank, as we saw at stop 2, fought stubbornly and inflicted many casualties before they were driven away with bayonets.

Administration Guilford Courthouse National Military Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Address all inquiries to the Superintendent, 2332 New Garden Road, Greensboro, NC 27410, or telephone (919) 288-1776.

About Your Visit Guilford Courthouse National Military Park is located 6 miles north of downtown Greensboro, N.C., off U.S. 220 on New Garden Road. The visitor center stands near the American First Line. Exhibits and a film help explain the battle. Information about special activities and seasonal programs can be obtained here or by contacting the superintendent. Special services are available for groups by arrangement. Follow the signs for self-guiding tours by car, bicycle, or on foot.