

Moore's Creek

National Battlefield
North Carolina

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Painting of engagement at the bridge by Gil Cohen

Traces of the Past

This 87-acre park preserves the site of the Revolutionary War battle of Moore's Creek Bridge, fought February 27, 1776, between loyalists supporting the British Crown and patriots of North Carolina. The only original remains are the bridge site and a stretch of the old Negro Head Point Road. In 1856 a Wilmington newspaper reported that some of the bridge's original foundation timbers and traces of the earthworks could still be seen. The role of the National Park Service is to preserve and protect this site unimpaired for this and future generations. More than 20 National Park System sites primarily commemorate the Revolutionary War.

The earthen mounds you see today mark the line of earthworks built by Col. Alexander Lillington's troops, the first patriots to arrive at the bridge. These earthworks take advantage of the high ground. One end was anchored in swampy ground, the other by the creek itself. In this position Lillington could fend off the raiding parties that might ford the creek and attack his side or rear. Here he also straddled the road that the loyalists must use if they attempted to cross the bridge. These earthworks were rehabilitated in the late 1930s. Their alignment is historically accurate, but their true height remains unknown.

A Tour of the Battlefield

Allow at least 90 minutes to tour the battlefield and see the exhibits and video at the visitor center. A diorama depicts the scene at the bridge as the patriots opened fire early on February 27, 1776. Original weapons on display include a Highland pistol, Brown Bess musket, half-pounder swivel gun, and broadsword.

The History Trail (1 mile) begins at the visitor center and connects the battlefield's historical features in an easy stroll. It briefly follows the trace of historic Negro Head Point Road, which dates from 1743, and was used by both sides in 1776. A boardwalk across Moore's Creek leads to Caswell's campsite for a loyalist-eye view of the bridge. Across the bridge you come to Bridge Monument and then the patriot earthworks at the site where the partially dismantled bridge played a key role in the patriot victory.



Larry Ulrich

Patriot artillery fired with great effect during the battle. This reproduction of a Dutch two-pounder cannon, mounted on an English "galloper" carriage, is positioned along the earthworks.

The Patriot (Grady) Monument, erected in 1857, commemorates both the battle and Pvt. John Grady, the only patriot killed. Nearby are the Loyalist Monument, dedicated in 1909 to the support-

ers of the British cause who "did their duty as they saw it," the James Moore Monument honoring a Moore's Creek Battleground Association president, and a monument honoring the heroic women of the Cape Fear region and the role of women in the American Revolution.

The **Tarheel Trail** (0.3 mile) begins near where the History Trail ends. Along this path exhibits interpret the production of naval stores (tar, pitch, and turpentine), the region's chief industry during the American Revolution.

About Your Visit

The battlefield is 20 miles northwest of Wilmington, N.C. From Wilmington take I-40 or U.S. 421 north to the junction with N.C. 210, then travel west on 210 to the park entrance. The battlefield is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except December 25 and January 1. Groups may contact the park staff in advance to arrange a guided tour.

Safety

- Be careful of the slippery banks along the creek.
- The park is home to several species of poisonous snakes; do not approach or startle snakes or any other wild animal.

More Information

Moore's Creek National Battlefield
40 Patriots Hall Dr.
Currie, NC 28435-5177
910-283-5591 or www.nps.gov/mocr

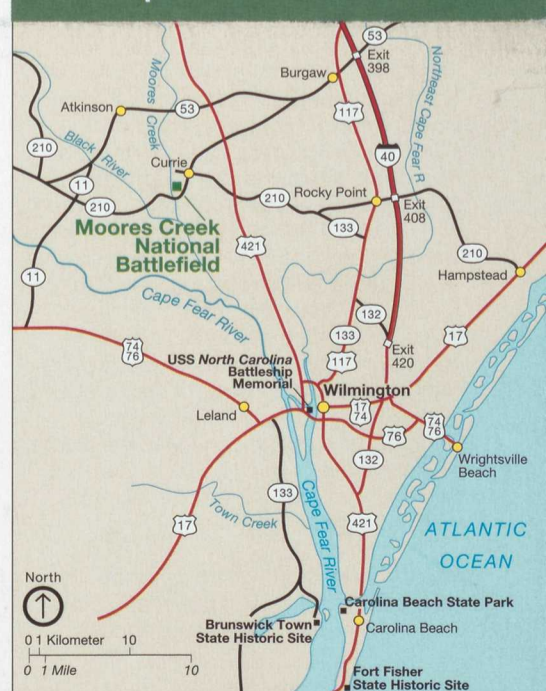
Also visit the National Park Service website: www.nps.gov.

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Park Map



Area Map

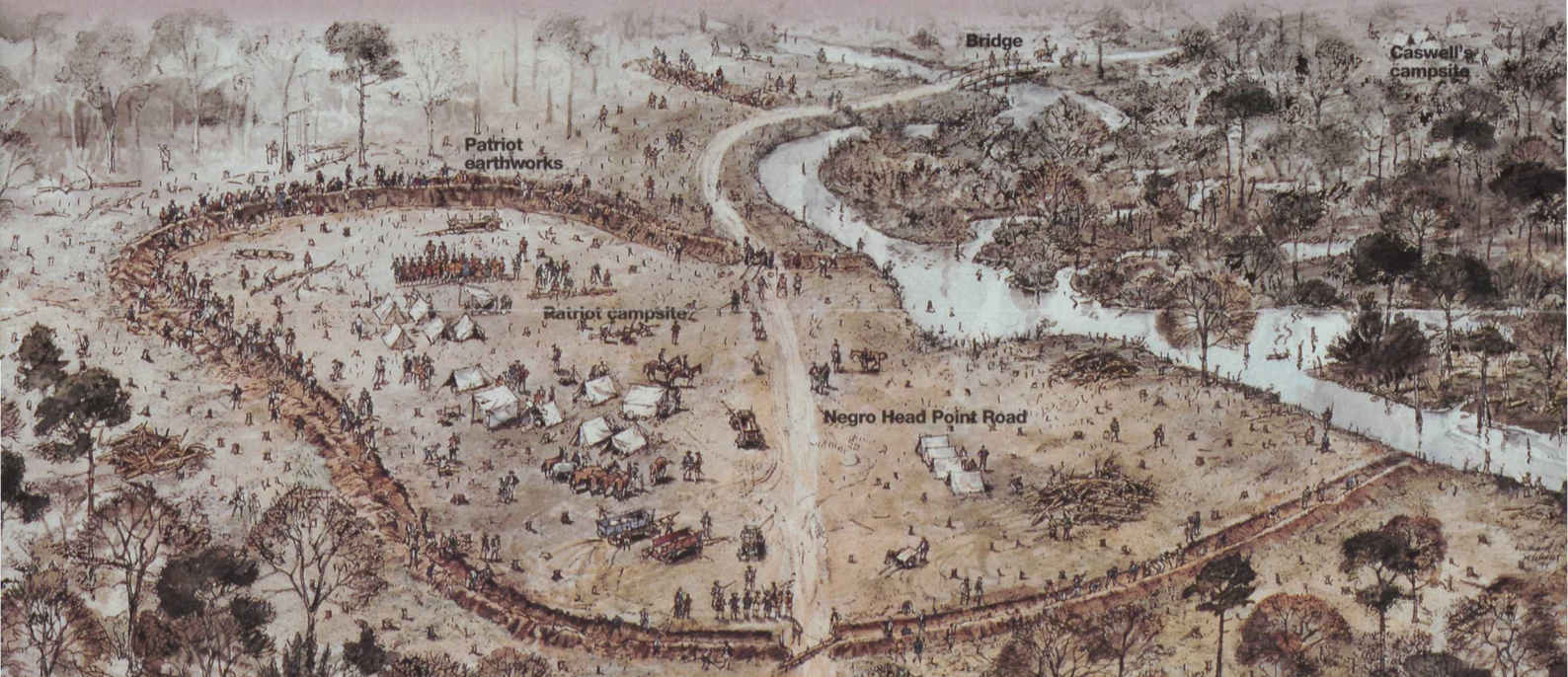


The Battle of Moores Creek Bridge

February 27, 1776

At Moores Creek Bridge a brief, violent clash at daybreak on February 27, 1776, saw patriots defeat a larger force of loyalists marching toward a rendezvous with a British naval squadron. Brief but important, the battle effectively ended royal authority in the colony of North Carolina and

helped forestall a full-scale British invasion of the South. The patriot victory also encouraged North Carolina, on April 12, 1776, to instruct its delegation to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to vote for independence from Britain. It was the first American colony to do so.



Present-day painting of the battle area by Richard Schlecht

As economic and political controversy with Great Britain became open rebellion in the mid-1770s, North Carolina was a divided colony: patriots were willing to fight for independence, but loyalists opposed war. Loyalists were mainly the Crown's officials and the wealthy merchants and tidewater planters. They also included many Scottish Highlanders—recent immigrants—and western, frontier Carolinians. The frontiersmen had unsuccessfully rebelled in 1771 against the colony's legislature and court system controlled by coastal interests. So, while patriot and loyalist numbers were evenly divided, sentiments were not so clear cut. Neither side at first wanted to kill the other. Each hoped the other would give in.

First Moves Toward War

News of the Lexington and Concord fighting in April 1775 further eroded royal authority. Unable to stop revolution in the colony, the Royal Governor Josiah Martin abandoned the capital of New Bern and fled to Fort Johnston on the lower Cape Fear River, where, by mid-July, North Carolina militia forced him to flee offshore to the British warship *Cruizer*. In exile Martin laid plans to reconquer North Carolina. He planned to raise an army of 10,000 and march it to a coastal rendezvous with Lord Cornwallis, Sir Henry Clinton, and naval officer Sir Peter Parker. Martin persuaded both his London and North American superiors that his plan would restore royal rule in the Carolinas. When organized on February 15, 1776, however, the loyalist soldiers numbered only 1,600.

The patriots had not been idle. In August and September 1775, they set up a Provincial Council government and, as the Continental Congress had recommended, raised two regiments of the Continental Line and several battalions of minutemen and militia. At the news that the loyalists were assembling at Cross Creek (Fayetteville), the patriots also gathered their forces. In Wilmington they threw up breastworks and prepared to fight. In New Bern authorities mustered the district's militia under Col. Richard Caswell and ordered it to join other militia to counter the loyalists. Col. James Moore, senior officer of the 1st North Carolina Continentals and the first to take the field, was given command.

The loyalists' plan was to advance along the Cape Fear River to the coast, provision the British naval troops, and join

them in conquering the colony. On February 20, 1776, the loyalist force under British Gen. Donald MacDonald began moving toward the coast. Blocked by Moore's forces at Rockfish Creek, MacDonald decided instead to march eastward toward Caswell's patriot force—expecting little opposition on his way to Wilmington.



Patriots removed planks from the original bridge to hinder the loyalists' crossing. This is a reconstruction of the bridge.

Outmaneuvered by MacDonald's change in march tactics, over the next five days the patriots sought possession of the bridge over Moores Creek, 20 miles above Wilmington. The bridge was a crucial crossing point—and the patriots' last chance to halt the loyalists' march to the coast, where a combined loyalist army and naval force would surely be unstoppable for the patriots. Moore sent Col. Alexander Lillington and his men to join Caswell and then sailed toward the coast with his patriots, landing just north of Wilmington, blocking the route between Moores Creek Bridge and the sea.

The Engagement at the Bridge

First to arrive at Moores Creek bridge on February 25, Lillington quickly grasped the position's defensive advantages. The creek wound through swampy terrain, and the bridge was the only place nearby to cross it. To control the crossing, Lillington's 150 men built a low earthwork overlooking the bridge and its eastern approach. Joining Lillington the next day, Caswell's 850 men built an earthwork on the bridge's other side. MacDonald's loyalists, 1,600 strong but with arms for less than 800, now camped six miles away.

Losing the race to the bridge, MacDonald had to choose—to again avoid a battle or to fight? He sent a letter offering the pa-

triot's a last chance to lay down arms and swear allegiance to the Crown. The patriots declined. A scout reported that patriot troops were vulnerable—but he did not know earthworks and cannon waited east of the creek. At a council of war the loyalists decided to attack. At 1:00 a.m. on February 27, with Maj. Donald McLeod commanding, the loyalists began their march to the bridge. Swampy terrain hindered them. During the night Caswell's patriots abandoned camp, withdrew across the creek, removed the bridge planks, and greased the girders. Posting artillery to cover the bridge, the patriots awaited the advancing loyalists.

Discovering Caswell's camp deserted, McLeod's loyalists regrouped in nearby woods to wait for daybreak. Gunfire erupted near the bridge before dawn, but McLeod could wait no longer. With broadswords drawn, his loyalists rushed the partly demolished bridge. When they were within 30 paces of the patriot earthwork, a fire of musketry and artillery met them. Within minutes the advance party was all but cut down, and the whole force had retreated. More than 30 loyalists were killed, and 40 were wounded. Only one patriot died. The patriots had blocked the loyalist march to the coast.

Within weeks most loyalists were captured. Spoils taken included 1,500 rifles, 350 "guns and shot-bags," 150 swords and dirks, and £15,000 sterling. The leaders were imprisoned or banished from the colony. Some went to Nova Scotia, and some returned to Scotland. Most loyalist soldiers were paroled to their homes.

The battle was small, but its implications were large. The victory showed the surprising patriot strength in the countryside. It discouraged growth of loyalist sentiment in the Carolinas and spurred revolutionary feeling in the colonies. The British sea-borne force, which finally arrived in May, moved on to Sullivans Island off Charleston, S.C. In late June patriot militia there repulsed Sir Peter Parker's land and naval attack, ending for two years any British hopes of squashing rebellion in the South. Had Britain conquered the South in early 1776, historian Edward Channing concluded, "it is entirely conceivable that rebellion would never have turned into revolution." Here at Moores Creek, and then again at Sullivans Island, "the Carolinians turned aside the one combination of circumstances that might have made British conquest possible."