

# Moores Creek

National Battlefield  
North Carolina

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## Traces of the Past

This 86-acre park preserves the site of the Revolutionary War battle of Moores Creek Bridge, fought February 27, 1776, between loyalists 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 original bridge's foundation timbers could still be seen, along with traces of the earthworks. The earthworks we see today are remnants of those built by Col. Alexander Lillington's troops, the first patriots to arrive at the bridge. This line of works was carefully planned to take advantage of high ground across the creek. One end was anchored in swampy ground, the other by the creek itself. In this position Lillington could fend off raiding parties that might ford the creek and attack him side or rear, and he straddled the road over which the loyalists must come after they crossed the bridge. The works were rehabilitated in the late 1930s. Recent archeology indicates that the present alignment is historically accurate, but it's not possible to determine the exact height or width of the original works.

### A Tour of the Battlefield

About two hours are needed to tour the battlefield and see the exhibits and audio-visual program at the visitor center. A diorama depicts the scene at the bridge as it may have appeared when the patriots opened fire on the morning of February 27, 1776. Among the original weapons on display are a broadsword, a Highland pistol, a Brown Bess musket, and a half-pounder swivel gun.

The **History Trail** (1 mile), which begins at the visitor center, connects the battlefield's

historical features in one easy stroll. It follows for a short distance the historic Negro Head Point Road trace, which dates from 1743 and was used by both sides at the time of the battle. A broadwalk crosses Moores



Patriot artillery fired with great effect during the battle. The cannon at the park today is a replica of a Dutch two-pounder, mounted on an English "galloper" carriage. It stands approximately where the original stood at the time of the battle.

Creek and leads to Caswell's campsite and a loyalist-eye-view of the bridge. Returning to the patriot earthworks, visitors may listen to an audio presentation about the battle while looking over the site where the partially dismantled bridge played a key role in the patriot victory.

The Patriot (Grady) Monument, constructed in 1857, is the oldest stone monument along the trail. It commemorates both the battle

and Pvt. John Grady, the only patriot killed. Nearby are the Loyalist Monument, which was dedicated in 1909 to the supporters of the British cause who "did their duty as they saw it. . . .", the James Moore Monument, and a monument to the heroic women of the Lower Cape Fear.

The **Tarheel Trail** (.3 mile) begins near the end of the History Trail. Exhibits along this path interpret the production of naval stores, the chief industry of this region during the American Revolution.

### About Your Visit

The battlefield is 20 miles northwest of Wilmington, N.C. From that city take I-40 or U.S. 421 north to the junction with N.C. 210; go west on 210 to the park entrance on the right. The battlefield is open daily except January 1 and December 25. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; the park closes at 6 p.m. on weekends from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Contact the park staff in advance to arrange guided tours.

### Safety

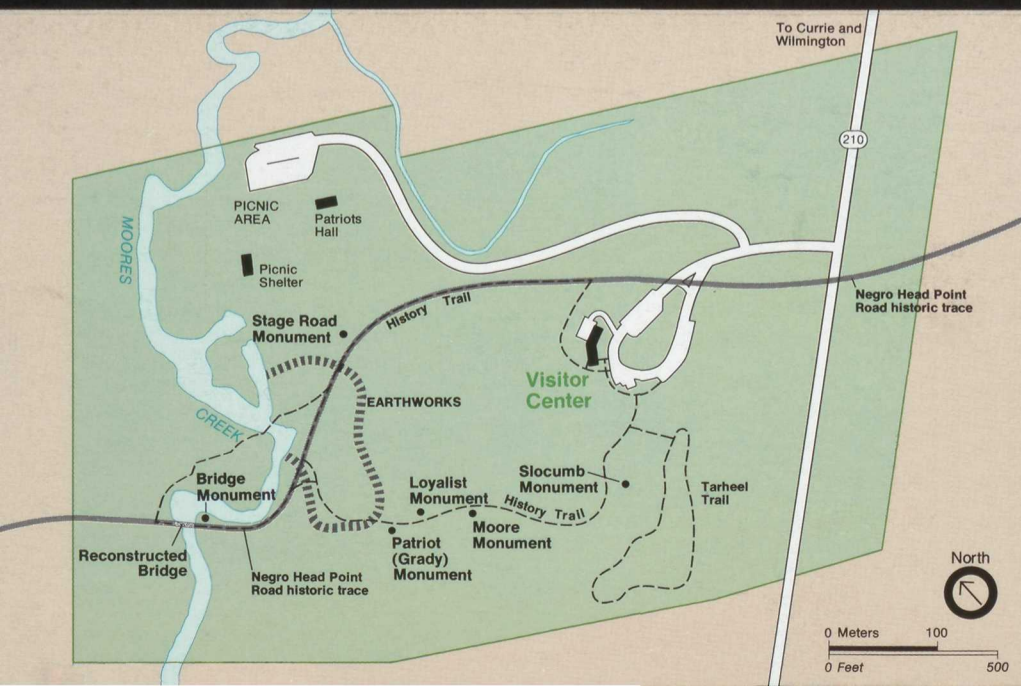
The park is the home of several species of poisonous snakes. Visitors should take normal precautions while in the park. Be wary, too, of the slippery banks along Moores Creek.

### Administration

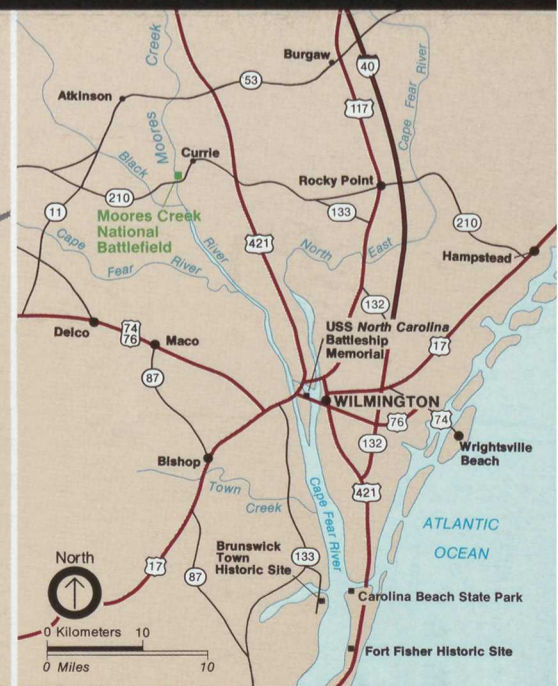
Moores Creek National Battlefield is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, P.O. Box 69, Currie, NC 28435.

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## The Park



## The Area



# The Battle of Moores Creek Bridge

## February 27, 1776

As the economic and political controversy with Great Britain gave way to open rebellion in the mid-1770s, North Carolina was left a badly divided colony. The legislature, which was popularly elected, opposed the royal governor, Josiah Martin, almost to a man. "Government here is as absolutely prostrate as impotent," Martin warned his superiors in London, "and nothing but the shadow of it is left." Yet many people who disliked parliamentary taxation and royal authority over provincial affairs nevertheless found the thought of fighting the mother country abhorrent. By mid-1775, North Carolinians had generally split into two groups: patriots, perhaps half the people, who were willing to take up arms for independence; and loyalists, primarily the Crown's officials, wealthy merchants, planters, and others of a conservative mind who opposed redressing their grievances by war. This last party included many Highlanders, who in recent decades had immigrated in sizable numbers to North Carolina, and some of the Regulators who had been defeated at Alamance in 1771.

### First Moves toward War

The news of the fighting at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, received in North Carolina a month later, further weakened royal authority. Unable to stem the tide of revolution in the colony, Martin abandoned New Bern, the capital, and fled to Fort Johnston on the lower Cape Fear, arriving there on June 2, 1775. Within 6 weeks, North Carolina militia forced him to flee again; this time offshore to the British warship *Cruizer*, as the fort burned behind him.

In exile Martin laid plans for the reconquest of North Carolina. First, he would raise in that colony an army of 10,000 men, two-thirds of them Highlanders and Regulators with strong loyalist feelings. Next, this army would march to the coast and rendezvous with a powerful expeditionary force under Lord Cornwallis, Sir Henry Clinton, and Sir Peter Parker. These combined army and naval forces were to concentrate at Brunswick, a seaport town below Wilmington, by February 15, 1776. Together they would re-establish royal authority in the Carolinas, striking wherever rebellion showed itself. Martin persuaded his superiors in London and commander in chief Thomas Gage in Boston that this host could easily restore order. The British ministry approved the plan and dispatched orders to the several commanders.

Governor Martin now set about recruiting his army. On January 10, 1776, he called upon all loyal subjects to unite to put down "a most daring, horrid, and unnatural Rebellion." Six months earlier General Gage had sent Donald MacDonald and Donald McLeod to North Carolina to recruit a Highland battalion. Martin now appointed MacDonald a brigadier general and McLeod a lieutenant colonel in the loyalist militia and directed them and others to enlist men.

To all Highlanders who pledged service to the Crown the British government promised 200 acres of land, cancellation of land fees, and tax exemption for 20 years. These terms, and Martin's efforts among other groups, brought in recruits, though not nearly as many as had been expected. The call went out for loyalists to assemble under MacDonald near Cross Creek (Fayetteville) and then march to the coast. When the force was organized on February 15, there were about 1600 men present: Highlanders, other loyalists, and some 130 ex-Regulators.

Meanwhile, the patriots had not been idle. While Martin tossed at sea, they began to mobilize their forces. Since Martin was technically out of the colony, the patriots in August and September 1775 set up a

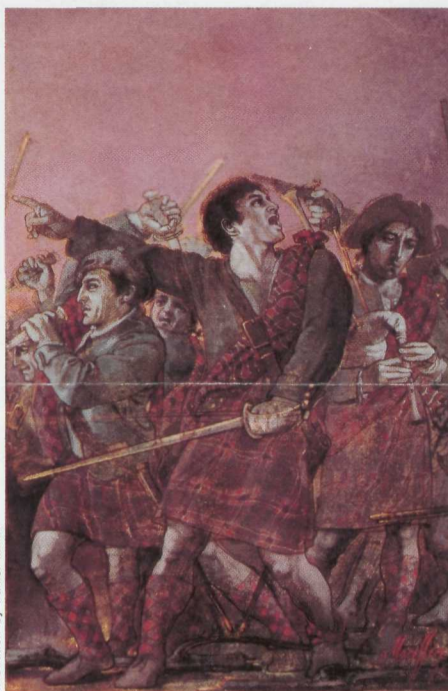


Illustration by Daniel Maffia

**At Moores Creek Bridge, in a brief but violent clash at daybreak on February 27, 1776, patriots defeated a larger force of loyalists on their way to rendezvous with a British expeditionary squadron expected on the coast. Small as the battle was, it had a crucial importance. The victory ended royal authority in the colony, helped forestall a full-scale invasion of the South, and encouraged North Carolina on April 12, 1776, to instruct its delegation to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to vote for independence—the first colony to do so.**

Provincial Council to govern in his place. Upon the recommendation of the Continental Congress, two regiments of the Continental Line and several battalions of minutemen and militia were raised.

At the news that the loyalists were assembling at Cross Creek, the patriots began gathering their forces. In Wilmington they threw up breastworks and prepared for fighting. In New Bern authorities mustered the district's militia under Col. Richard Caswell and ordered it to join with other militia in countering the loyalists. Col. James Moore, the senior officer of the 1st N.C. Continentals and the first to take the field, was given command.

The loyalists' plan was to advance along the southwest side of the Cape Fear River to the coast, provision the British troops arriving by sea, and then join them in conquering the colony. On February 20, 1776, MacDonald began his movement toward the coast. Blocked by Moore at Rockfish Creek, he marched eastward in the general direction of Caswell's force, crossed the Cape Fear, and proceeded toward the Negro Head Point Road, a route into Wilmington along which he expected little opposition. Outmaneuvered by MacDonald's march tactics, Caswell withdrew from defending Corbett's Ferry on the Black River in order to "take possession of the Bridge upon Widow Moore's Creek." some 20 miles above Wilmington and a place the loyalists had to cross on their way to the coast. After sending Col. Alexander Lillington to join Caswell, Moore fell back toward Wilmington, hoping to fall on the rear of MacDonald's column as Caswell obstructed him in front.

### The Engagement at the Bridge

When Lillington arrived at the bridge on the 25th, he quickly saw the position's defensive advantages. The creek, a dark, sluggish stream about 35 feet wide, wound through swampy terrain and could be crossed in the

vicinity only over this bridge. To dominate the crossing, Lillington built a low earthwork on a slight rise overlooking the bridge and its approach from the east. Joining Lillington the next day, Caswell sent his men across the bridge to throw up earthworks there. Thus by the evening of February 26, the patriots straddled the bridge. Lillington with 150 men waited on the east side of the creek, and Caswell with 850 men were camped on the west. MacDonald's loyalists, 1600 strong but with arms for less than half that many, camped 6 miles away.

MacDonald had lost the race to the bridge and now had to decide whether to avoid fighting once more or to cut through their opponents. At a council of war the younger leaders carried the debate, and eventually all agreed that the enemy should be attacked. An element in the decision was the report by a scout that Caswell's position lay on their side of the river and was thus vulnerable.

At 1 a.m. on the 27th the loyalists set out on their march to the attack, with a party of 75 picked broadswordsmen under Capt. John Campbell in the lead. By now MacDonald had fallen ill, and Donald McLeod was in command. The going was slow, for the route lay through thickets and swampy ground. During the night Caswell abandoned camp and withdrew across the creek. Once on the other side, Caswell's men removed the planks and greased the girders. Posting artillery to cover the bridge, they waited in darkness for the advancing Scots.

An hour before dawn the loyalists came upon Caswell's deserted camp and found the fires burning low. Moving on to nearby woods, McLeod regrouped his men and passed the rallying cry—"King George and Broad Swords"—along the line. There they waited for daybreak. Suddenly gunfire sounded near the bridge. Though it was not yet light, McLeod couldn't wait any longer. Three cheers rang out—the signal for the attack—and the loyalists rushed the partly demolished bridge with broadswords out and bagpipes skirling. Picking their way over the bridge and onto the opposite bank, they got within 30 paces of the patriot earthworks before they were met by a withering fire of musketry and artillery. Nearly all the advance party were cut down, and the whole force soon retreated. It was all over in a few minutes. Pursuit turned the repulse into a rout. The loyalists lost some 30 killed and 40 wounded. Only one patriot died.

Within weeks the patriots had captured "all suspected persons" and disarmed "all Highlanders and Regulators that were . . . in the late battle." The spoils included 1500 rifles, 350 "guns and shot-bags," 150 swords and dirks, and £15,000 sterling. Some 850 "common Soldiers" and most of the loyalists were captured. The leaders were imprisoned or banished from the colony. The soldiers were paroled to their homes.

Though the battle was a small one, the implications were large. The victory demonstrated the surprising patriot strength in the countryside, discouraged the growth of loyalist sentiment in the Carolinas, and spurred revolutionary feeling throughout the colonies. The British seaborne force, which finally arrived in May, moved on to Sullivan's Island off Charleston, S.C. In late June patriot militia repulsed Sir Peter Parker's land and naval attack, ending British hopes of squashing rebellion in the South for two years. "Had the South been conquered in the first half of 1776," the historian Edward Channing concluded, "it is entirely conceivable that rebellion would never have turned into revolution . . . At Moores Creek and Sullivan's Island the Carolinians turned aside the one combination of circumstances that might have made British conquest possible."