

Ninety Six

Ninety Six
National Historic Site
South Carolina

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Siege of Ninety Six, 1781



The ruins of the star fort and the patriots' siege lines survived in surprisingly good condition well into this century. Archeologists found evidence of all the principal works and had no trouble restoring the old outlines, if not the original contours and heights.

There are few better examples on this continent of 18th-century siegecraft or of the close personal nature of battle in that day. The photo at left looks down the patriots' lines toward the British fort. Approach trenches (1) zigzag toward the second (2) and third (3) parallels. This last parallel, supported by a rifle tower (4), stood only a few yards from the star fort. It was from this line on June 18, 1781, that Nathanael Greene launched the attack on the fort. His plan was to send axmen and hookmen to breach the work and follow them with a general assault from the trenches. The axmen cut through the sharpened stakes that bristled from the fort walls and the hookmen had a go at the sandbags piled high on the parapet. Seeing his defenses crumble at the hands of the sappers, the fort commander ordered troops into the ditch outside the fort. Fighting hand-to-hand, they drove off the work parties with great slaughter. Greene never mounted the main attack.



Nathanael Greene



"Light-horse Harry" Lee



Thaddeus Kosciuszko

The siege of this frontier post grew out of one of the great dramas of the Revolution: the second British attempt to conquer the South. The campaign opened in late 1778 with an assault on Savannah. By autumn 1780 the British held Georgia and most of South Carolina, and a powerful army under Cornwallis was poised to carry the war northward. At this point the fortunes of war turned abruptly against Cornwallis. He lost one wing of his army at Kings Mountain and another at Cowpens, and he himself, early in 1781, faced a resurgent Continental Army under the resourceful generalship of Nathanael Greene. Cornwallis drove Greene from the field at Guilford Court House in mid-March, but at such cost that he had to retire to the coast with his battered army. Choosing not to pursue the main force, Greene set out to reduce the chain of posts the British held across the backcountry. In May 1781 he brought his army of a thousand regulars and a few militia to Ninety Six.

This post was essential to British influence in the region. It was garrisoned by some 550 battle-toughened American loyalists led by Col. John Cruger. When he took command the year before, Cruger strengthened the already formidable defenses with a stockade on the west and a star fort on the east. Lacking heavy artillery, Greene opened siege operations on May 22. His engineer Thaddeus Kosciuszko began digging a system of parallels and approach trenches. By June 10 the third parallel was finished, and a few days later a wooden tower, from which riflemen could suppress fire from the fort, was put up. When Greene learned that a powerful relief column was marching to Cruger's aid, he resolved to storm the post before he was trapped between the two forces. His plan was simple: mount simultaneous attacks on the left and right.

The onslaught began at noon on June 18. "Light-horse Harry" Lee's legion fought their

way into the west redoubt, but at the star fort, the Continentals met stiff resistance and were driven off by a fierce counterattack, with much bloodshed on both sides. This repulse decided the contest. The rescue column was too near for Greene to organize a general attack. Gathering his wearied army, Greene slipped away before dawn on the 20th, moving down the Island Ford Road and across the Saluda River before the British could give effective chase. Once again Greene emerged from a battle as a tactical loser but a strategic victor. Within a few weeks the British abandoned the ruined village and pulled back the garrison to an interior post nearer the coast.

Ninety Six



Views of old Ninety Six today: 1. The star fort. 2. The stockade fort on the west. 3. Restored

early 19th-century log cabin. 4. The historic road that passed through the village. 5. The well

dug by loyalists defending the star fort.

A Tour of the Park

Old Ninety Six figured in both war and peace. Through the middle decades of the 18th century, this crossroads hamlet was an economic and political center of the South Carolina backcountry. During the Revolution, it was the scene of repeated confrontations between loyalists and patriots, culminating in the longest siege of the war conducted by the Continental Army.

To see the main features of the park, take the mile-long walking trail shown on the map at right.

1. Historic Island Ford Road Decades of travel cut this road to its present depth. Seven miles north, it crossed the Saluda River at Island Ford and joined roads leading to Charlotte and Camden.

2. Siege Lines The siege was conducted strictly by the manual: three parallels deep enough for infantry, and zigzag approach trenches (saps) that could not be enfiladed by enemy fire. The operations were directed by Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the Polish military engineer and aide to General Greene.

3. The Star Fort was the heart of the British defense. It bristled with obstacles to an assaulting force: a deep ditch, a palisade of sharpened stakes midway up the outer wall, and sandbags stacked on the parapet to protect the defenders from shot and shell.

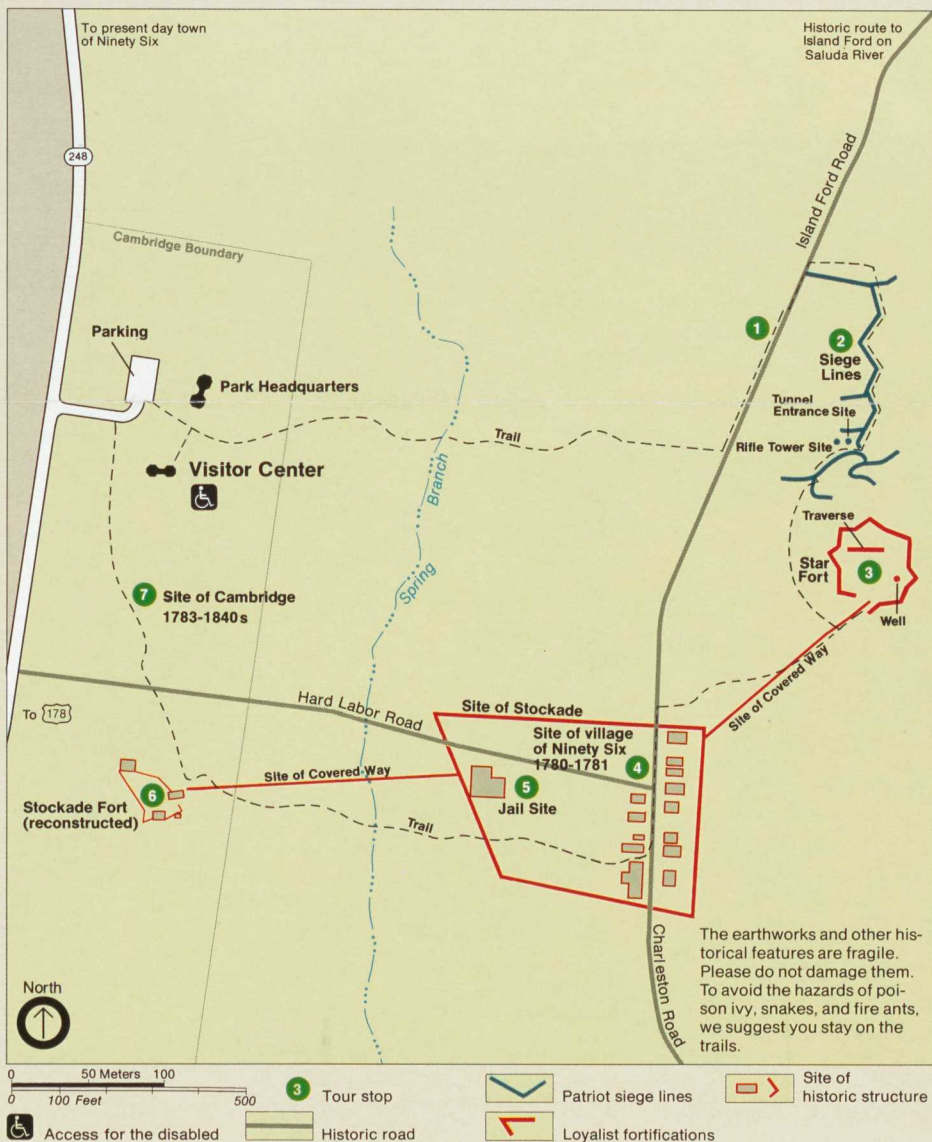
4. Site of Ninety Six The village was important to British defense of backcountry South Carolina. Troops stationed here served to inspire loyalists in the region, intimidate the increasingly vocal patriots, and help maintain British links with their Cherokee allies to the west.

5. Jail Site A two-story brick jail—the first in these parts—was built here in 1772. The jailer and his family lived on the first floor, the prisoners on the second. During the siege, a V-shaped earthwork with a deep ditch guarded the north side.

6. Stockade Fort This stronghold—the west redoubt attacked by Lee's legion—was built around the farm of one James Holmes, an active loyalist, to guard Spring Branch, the only reliable water supply for the village.

7. Site of Cambridge People began drifting back to Ninety Six during the late 1780s. They wanted to build a new town that would be a center of learning. The town was named after the great English university but never lived up to expectations. After an epidemic swept through in 1815, Cambridge became little more than a crossroads.

Administration
Ninety Six National Historic Site is on S.C. 248, two miles south of the town of Ninety Six. The site is open every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., except Christmas, New Year's, and Thanksgiving Days.



The earthworks and other historical features are fragile. Please do not damage them. To avoid the hazards of poison ivy, snakes, and fire ants, we suggest you stay on the trails.

Frontier Village

No one is certain how the village got its name. One explanation is that traders out of Charleston thought this stopping place was 96 miles from the Cherokee town of Keowee in the Blue Ridge foothills. Following an ancient path worn by Indians, they packed firearms, blankets, and trinkets into the backcountry and swapped them for deer skins and furs. By 1700 or so this trail was a major commercial artery. Over it flowed goods essential to the prosperity of the young colony.

The region then was a wilderness paradise, with temperate climate, rich soil, vast forests of hardwood, clear-running streams, abundant game. After the power of the Cherokee was broken in 1761, settlers flooded into the country beyond the Saluda River. Ninety Six lay in the middle of this land boom. The first settler here was one Robert Gouedy, who opened a store in 1751. A veteran of the Cherokee trade, he parlayed that hazardous enterprise into a huge busi-

ness that rivaled that of some Charleston merchants. He grew grain and tobacco, raised cattle, served as a frontier banker, and sold cloth, shoes, beads, gunpowder, tools and rum. He eventually amassed over 1,500 acres, and at his death in 1775 some 500 persons were in his debt.

On the eve of the Revolution, Ninety Six was a thriving village of 12 houses, a sizable courthouse, and a sturdy jail. At least a hundred persons lived in the vicinity, and the land was cleared for a mile around. On the question of independence, sentiment was probably even more divided than along the coast. In what has been called the first major land battle in the South, 1,800 loyalists on 18 November 1775 attacked one-third that number of patriots under Maj. Andrew Williamson gathered at Ninety Six. After several days of fighting, the two sides agreed to a truce. But patriot spirit was running high, and the low-country leaders

soon mounted an expedition that swept away organized loyalist resistance. Yet crushing the King's friends did not bring peace to the backcountry. Instead, a savage war of factions broke out that lasted until 1781.

Greene's siege that year left the village a smoking ruin. The departing loyalists set fire to the few buildings still standing and even tried to destroy the star fort. Within a few years a new town began to arise near the site of the old one. Taking the name Cambridge in 1787, it flourished for a while as a county seat and the home of an academy. The loss of the courthouse in 1800 started a decline from which the town never recovered. By mid-century, both old Ninety Six and newer Cambridge were little more than memories.