



The star fort was the heart of British defenses at Ninety Six and the stone upon which Gen. Nathanael Greene's well-planned siege stumbled. Although Greene and his patriot army were unsuccessful, the victorious loyalists soon abandoned the post and moved their garrison toward the coast.



Gen. Nathanael Greene commanded the southern Continental Army.

The Siege of Ninety Six, 1781

The siege of this frontier post grew out of one of the great dramas of the American Revolution—the second attempt by the British to conquer the South. Their first campaign in 1775-76 had failed. The second campaign began in late 1778 with an assault on Savannah, Ga. On May 12, 1780, loyalists (Americans loyal to British interests) captured Charleston, S.C., America's fourth largest city and commercial capital of the South. By September 1780 loyalists held Georgia and most of South Carolina. A powerful army under Gen. Lord Cornwallis was poised to carry the war northward. British forces seemed unstoppable.

Surprises for the Loyalists In the fall of 1780 American patriots (those seeking independence from British rule) turned the war against Cornwallis. On October 7 he lost his entire left offensive arm and its commander Maj. Patrick Ferguson at Kings Mountain, S.C. On January 17, 1781, he lost his right striking force under the command of Col. Banastre Tarleton at Cow-

pens. By early 1781 Cornwallis faced a resurgent Continental Army under the command of Gen. Nathanael Greene. Cornwallis drove Greene and the patriots from the field at Guilford Courthouse in mid-March, but at such a cost that he and his battered loyalist army had to retreat to the coast. Greene decided not to pursue Cornwallis and set out to reduce the chain of backcountry posts held by the British.

Critical Crossroads The hamlet named Ninety Six was a vital political and economic center in the South Carolina backcountry. It was garrisoned by 550 American loyalists led by Lt. Col. John Cruger. When Cruger took command in 1780 he bolstered the town's defenses. Under his orders loyalist soldiers and slaves from nearby farms reinforced the walls of the stockades and built the star fort.

Greene and his patriot army of 1,000 regulars and a few militia arrived at Ninety Six on May 21, 1781. One look at the formidable defenses, along with their own lack of heavy artillery, ruled out a quick, direct assault. Only a siege could bring down Ninety Six.

Greene focused his attack on the star fort. Col. Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a military engineer and aide to Greene, directed the siege operations. Sappers (trench diggers) began digging a system of parallels and approach trenches through the hard clay—an exhausting labor made worse by intense heat, mosquitoes, and cannon fire from the fort. They completed the first parallel on June 1, the second on June 3, and the third on June 10. Now they were within musket range of the loyalists.

During the night of June 13 Greene's men built a 30-foot tower of logs close to the

fort, hoping to suppress loyalist cannon and musket fire from its top. Then, Greene learned that a relief column of 2,000 British troops was marching to Cruger's aid. He resolved to storm the post before he was trapped between the two forces.

June 18—The Attack at Noon The onslaught began at noon. Col. Henry "Light-horse Harry" Lee's legion captured the stockade fort to the west of the village. Greene launched his attack on the star fort from the third parallel. Troops moved forward in the trenches, inching four 6-pounder cannon toward the fort. But the cannon fire was not powerful enough to breach the 10- to 12-foot-thick earthen wall. Greene ordered 50 soldiers forward to prepare the way for the main army. Men with axes cut through the sharpened stakes that protruded from the fort's walls, and those with hooks sliced the sandbags piled on the parapet. Cruger, seeing the fort under direct assault, ordered troops out into the ditch that surrounded the fort. Fighting hand-to-hand, loyalists drove the patriots off but 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 June 20, moving north up the Island Ford Road and across the Saluda River before the loyalists could give chase. Although Greene lost the siege, his offensive weakened Cruger's stronghold in the backcountry. By July the loyalists abandoned Ninety Six and moved to a post nearer the coast.

Portraits of Nathanael Greene (top right) and Henry Lee (left) by Charles Willson Peale. Portrait of Thaddeus Kosciuszko (lower right) by Julian Pys. Courtesy: Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, Pa.



Col. Henry Lee earned the nickname "Light-horse Harry" for his skillful command of cavalry units.

Deciphering the Earthworks



The loyalists' star fort survived as you see it today. In 1973 and 1974 archeologists found evidence of the patriots' siege trenches and restored the old outlines, including the original contours. There are few better examples of 18th-century siegecraft or of the close personal nature of battle in that day.

The Siege Trenches

Col. Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a native of Poland, was trained in the classical methods of European warfare and siegecraft. He knew that if a fort could not be taken by force, a siege—the process of surrounding an enemy's strong point and slowly cutting off all contact with the outside world—was the patriots' only hope for victory at Ninety Six.

Starting about 200 yards from the fort, sappers (the trench diggers included men from the patriot army and slaves borrowed from nearby farms) dug a four-foot-wide and three-foot-deep trench parallel to the fort, so the patriots could move in troops and supplies. Then they dug zigzag approach trenches toward the fort, mounding up the earth for protection. The zigzag pattern made it more difficult for loyalists to fire on men in the trenches. At about 70 yards sappers dug the second parallel. They worked their way toward the fort adding more zigzag



Thaddeus Kosciuszko

approach trenches, gun batteries, and a third parallel at about 40 yards from the fort. From here the patriots fired at a single point, hoping to breach the wall and take the fort.

Victory by attackers or defenders always hung in the balance. Luck, as well as skill, was often an important factor. Conducting a textbook siege did not guarantee success either, for the loyalists were busy too—firing at the sappers and sending out nighttime raiding parties.

Slaves living here before the siege made this celonware bowl in their African tradition by firing unglazed, handformed clay on an open hearth.



The photo above looks south down the patriots' lines toward the loyalists' star fort.

Photos of star fort (top) and siege trenches (left); William A. Bake, NPS; Bewl, NPS

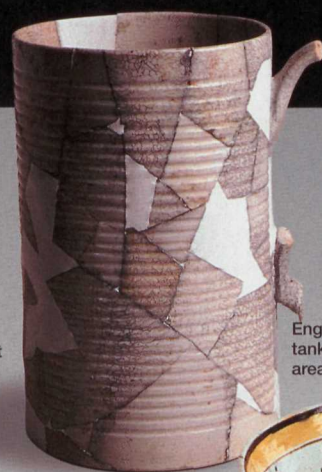
The Village—Then and Now



Prehistoric Indian tools from left: chert flake (undated), two quartz points (undated), chert point (about 800 years old)



Bone-handled knife and fork



English salt-glazed stoneware tankard ca. 1760–1770 (white areas are repairs)



English mochaware creamer ca. 1815



English pearlware bowl and handleless cup ca. 1810



Bone buttons

Archeologists digging here and people just walking the fields found these items. They date from prehistoric times to the 18th and 19th centuries. By the 1820s Indians, traders, and colonists were gone. Only these tools of everyday life remain to tell their story.

Life in the Frontier Village

No one is certain how the village Ninety Six got its name. One explanation is that traders out of Charleston thought this intersection of trails was 96 miles south of the major Cherokee town of Keowee in the Blue Ridge foothills. Traders packed firearms, blankets, beads, and wares along an ancient Indian trail called the Cherokee Path and swapped them for animal skins. By 1700 this trail was a major commercial artery. Over it flowed goods essential to the prosperity of the young colony.

The Cherokee Path intersected with other paths here, and Ninety Six became a convenient camping place for traders. In 1751 Robert Gouedy opened a trading post at Ninety Six,



These cufflinks reflect the fashions of colonial Ninety Six, including patterned glass, ivory, and silver engraved with designs and a "C."

which firmly established this stopover as a hub of the backcountry Indian trade. A veteran of the Cherokee trade, he parlayed that enterprise into a huge business that rivaled some of Charleston's 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 more than 1,500 acres, and at his death in 1775 some 500 persons were in his debt.

Friction intensified in the 1750s between the Cherokee and the settlers pushing into Ninety Six and its surrounding area. Settlers, militia workers, and slaves built a stockade around Gouedy's barn for protection, which became Fort Ninety Six. It served them well in 1760 when the Cherokee attacked twice but failed to capture the fort. After years of fighting, the Cherokee signed a treaty in 1761 that curtailed their travels beyond Keowee. Peace followed, along with a resurgence in land development. The British enticed settlers to the frontier with the promise of protection, financial aid, free tools, and free land. New settlers flooded into the country beyond the Saluda River—many were slave owners intent on finding easy prosperity. Ninety Six lay in the middle of this land boom.

On the eve of the American Revolution, Ninety Six was a prosperous community with several homes, mills, a blacksmith and other shops, a courthouse, and a sturdy jail. At least 100 persons lived in the vicinity. On the question of independence, sentiment was more divided here than along the coast. For many settlers incentives and protection from the Cherokee

created strong loyalties toward Great Britain. Others thought that the Crown shirked on its promises to backcountry settlers—they wanted independence. On November 19, 1775, in the American Revolution's first major land battle in the South, 1,900 loyalists attacked about 600 patriots gathered at Ninety Six under Maj. Andrew Williamson. After several days of fighting the two sides agreed to a truce, but patriot spirit was running high. Patriot leaders soon mounted an expedition to sweep away loyalist supporters. But, subduing the King's friends did not bring peace to the backcountry. Instead, a savage war of factions broke out that lasted until 1781. In June 1781 Gen. Nathanael Greene's attempt to take the fort by siege failed. In July departing loyalists left the village a smoking ruin; they set fire to the buildings, filled in the siegeworks, 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. In 1787 the villagers, aspiring to build a town that would be a center of learning, named it Cambridge after the English university. Cambridge flourished for a while as the county seat and the home of an academy. The courthouse burned in 1800 starting a decline from which the town never recovered. After a flu epidemic swept through in 1815, Cambridge became little more than a crossroads. By the mid-1800s, both old Ninety Six and newer Cambridge were little more than memories.

Artifacts (above): dishes and flatware, South Carolina Dept. of Archeology and Anthropology; Prehistoric Indian tools, Ninety Six NHS/Southeast Archeological Center; cufflinks and buttons, Merle McGee; all photos, National Park Service.

About Your Visit



This house (now the Black Swan Tavern) was built nearby in 1787 and moved here in 1968.



The Black Swan Tavern is furnished as an 18th-century inn. Special events show frontier life.



Modern-day reenactors rest on the Tavern's porch.

Ninety Six was important in peace and in war. Through the middle decades of the 1700s, this crossroads village was an economic and political center of the South Carolina backcountry. During the American 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. In 1976, to honor this important example of our nation's heritage, Congress designated the park as Ninety Six National Historic Site.

Visitor Center

At the visitor center you will find information, a museum, bookstore, and a short video. The park is open every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.; it is closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

Activities

Not to be missed is the one-mile walking tour of the park. You will see the earthworks, historic roads, the sites of the siege and battle, and the sites of the village and stockades. The 1.5-mile Gouedy Trail passes the grave of Gouedy's son. The park has an 18th-century encampment in April and a candlelight tour in October. Ask at the visitor center about special activities.

Accessibility

The visitor center, museum, and restrooms are accessible for visitors with disabilities. Although paved, the path for the walking tour of the park is steep in places—people with wheelchairs or strollers should use extreme caution. The Gouedy Trail is unpaved, with some grades.

For a Safe Visit

Please observe these regulations. •The star fort, parallels, and other features along the siege trenches are fragile—do not climb or walk on the earthworks. •Stay on established walks and trails to help prevent erosion. On the Gouedy Trail watch out for uneven footing and exposed tree roots. •Beware of fire ants, poison ivy, ticks, and snakes. Never put your hands or feet into a place that you can't see. •Federal law protects all historical and natural features. Metal detecting or digging for artifacts is strictly prohibited. Do not collect, damage, or remove any plants, wildlife, rocks, or artifacts. Report suspicious activity to a ranger. **In an emergency contact a ranger or call 911.**

Getting Here

Ninety Six National Historic Site is on S.C. 248 two miles south of the present-day town of Ninety Six.

From I-26 take exit 74 and follow signs to the park.

More Information

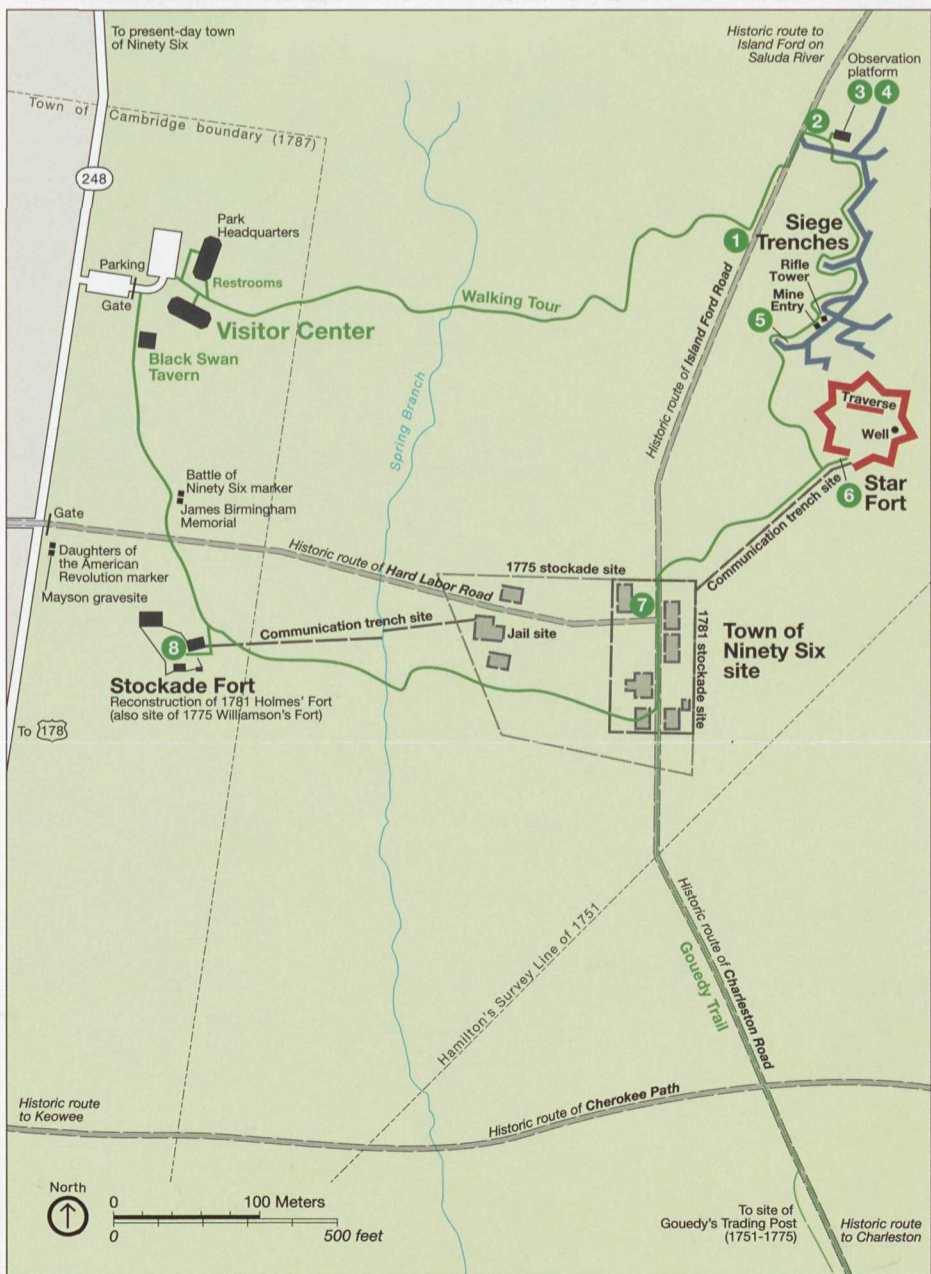
Write: Ninety Six National Historic Site
P.O. Box 496
Ninety Six, SC 29666-0496
Call: 864-543-4068
Internet: www.nps.gov/nisi



Island Ford Road

A Walking Tour of the Park

- 1 Island Ford Road** You are parallel to a colonial road that came through Ninety Six. Decades of travel cut the road to its present depth. The road crossed the Saluda River at Island Ford, seven miles north.
- 2 Patriot Forces Arrive** On May 21, 1781, the Continental Army under General Greene came along Island Ford Road, soon launching the siege.
- 3 British Fortification** Colonel Cruger bolstered Ninety Six's defenses by adding stockades, digging ditches around buildings, and building the star fort. Slaves did much of the work.
- 4 Siege Trenches** Colonel Kosciuszko conducted siege operations by the manual: three **parallels** were connected by zigzag **approach trenches** (saps) that could not be enfiladed by enemy fire. From the third parallel sappers dug a **mine**—a six-foot-vertical shaft. From its bottom they tunneled toward the star fort and planned to blast open the wall so troops could charge inside. The siege ended before the mine was finished. This was the only use of a mine in the American Revolution. Patriots built a 30-foot log **rifle tower** about 30 yards from the fort, so they could fire directly down onto the loyalists. This 10-foot tower is a reconstruction.
- 5 The Attack** Patriots began firing at noon on June 18. Fifty patriots rushed into the fort's ditch to open the way for the army. Loyalists assaulted them on both sides, killing 30. Greene halted the final attack.
- 6 Star Fort** These earthen mounds are the actual remains of the star fort. At the time of the siege the walls rose 14 feet above the bottom of the ditch. During the siege loyalists added the protective **traverse** and dug a 25-foot **well**. They found no water, and slaves continued to sneak water to them at night through the **communication trench (covered way)**, four-to-five-foot deep ditches that connected the star fort, village, and stockade fort.
- 7 Town of Ninety Six** Three roads intersected here. Loyalist troops here maintained British links with the Cherokee and tried to suppress the increasingly vocal patriots. A two-story brick **jail**—the first in the area—was built here in 1772. The jailer lived on the first floor, prisoners on the second. Another **communication trench** led to the stockade fort.
- 8 Stockade Fort** Loyalists built a stockade around the home of James Holmes to guard the town's water supply. On June 18 Colonel Lee captured the fort but held it only until Greene ended the attack. This stockade fort is a reconstruction.



- 1 Tour stop
- Walking tour trail (paved)
- Other trail (unpaved)
- Patriot trenches
- Loyalist Star Fort
- Site of historic structure (Some historic structures are marked on the ground with colored posts.)

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