Guilford Courthouse

NATIONAL MILITARY PARK • NORTH CAROLINA

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On March 15, 1781, Britain's Earl Cornwallis won a costly victory over Gen. Nathanael Greene's American forces at Guilford Courthouse. So costly was this victory that the weakened British army soon marched off to Yorktown and final surrender.

In 1780, as the Revolution dragged into its fifth year, British troops seized Charleston. Already they occupied Savannah and much of Georgia. Now they would move into the Carolina interior, rally Loyalists to their standard, pacify the countryside, and then march into Virginia. Once they secured the southern colonies, the British could strike northward to crush the rebellion. From Charleston, Cornwallis' troops moved north to Guilford Courthouse, to find Green's forces awaiting them.

Stationing his American army in three separate lines, Greene ordered the first two—mostly untrained North Carolina and Virginia militia—to fire on the battle-wise British army and fall back behind the trained regular Continental troops of the third and last line. Attacking this third line, the British drove off one American regiment. Then the veteran First Maryland mounted a bayonet charge, supported by Lt. Col. William Washington's cavalry. With the battle going against him, Cornwallis ordered his cannon to fire into the mixed American and British, thus halting the Continental counterattack.

The Americans withdrew, allowing the British to claim success. Yet the winner suffered so severely that Charles James Fox, a British statesman, declared, "Another such victory will ruin the British Army." Having lost a fourth of his army, Cornwallis withdrew to Wilmington, and from there went on to Yorktown and eventual surrender.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

In the visitor center, located at the site of the American Second Line, museum exhibits and an audiovisual program explain the battle. You can purchase a 40-page illustrated handbook about the Battle of Guilford Courthouse at the park, or from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D.C. 20402, for 25 cents.

Those who plan to visit in a group can receive special services by making advance arrangements with the superintendent.

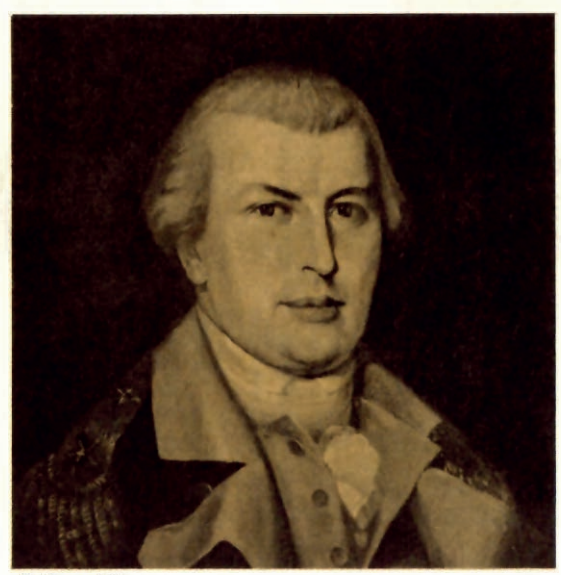
A ½-mile historical self-guiding walking trail leads from the visitor center to the American First Line area and to many of the monuments in the park. Several prominent historical figures are buried here, including William Hooper and John Penn, both North Carolina signers of the Declaration of Independence.

ADMINISTRATION

Guilford Courthouse National Military Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 9145, Plaza Station, Greensboro, N.C. 27408, is in immediate charge.

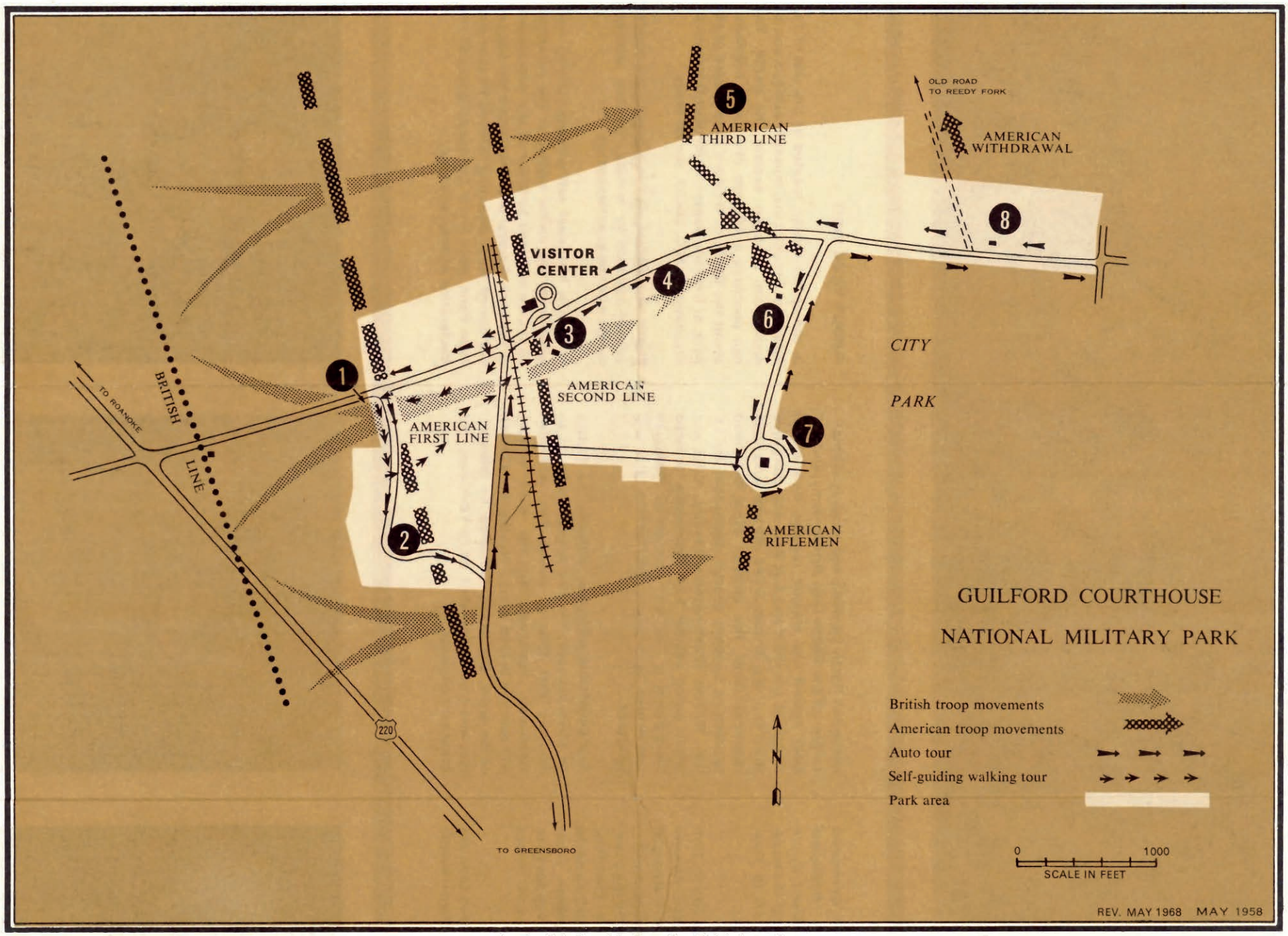
THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

U. S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service



Nathanael Greene

Lord Charles Cornwallis



A TOUR OF THE BATTLEFIELD

Begin the self-guiding auto tour at the visitor center. Exhibits and signs identify the battlefield's historic sites.

1. **American First Line.** To your right, raw North Carolina militiamen rested their flintlocks on a rail fence and intently peered across the open field. Somewhere beyond the far woods the British were coming. General Green ordered the militiamen to fire two volleys; then, said he, they could fall back. About 1:30 p.m. the Carolinians saw a colorful motion in the trees. It was Cornwallis' men forming for battle. Then, a few rounds from the Royal Artillery, and the mass of infantry came out of the trees at a quickstep. On they came, in battleworn red, blue, and green uniforms, across the plowed field. The line halted and fired a volley, and a thousand and more muskets erupted in one great roar. Again they came on, bayonets outthrust, in nearly perfect alinement. Some of the Carolinians managed to get off their two rounds before the bayonets crossed the fence.

2. **Along the Front Line of Battle.** Any defense line's flank is a position of danger; it must be manned by good troops. Here, holding the left of the American first line, stood the veteran light infantry and cavalry of "Lighthorse" Harry Lee's Legion. Alongside were William Campbell's tough Virginia riflemen who had helped bring the British to bay at King's Mountain. Once more, their galling fire punished the enemy. As Lee's and Campbell's men fell back, still fighting stubbornly, they drew after them troops that Cornwallis could well have used elsewhere. For the rest of the battle they fought their own, almost separate fight.

3. **American Second Line.** Virginia militiamen stood in this heavy timber, manning the second line. Relatively untrained, they were nevertheless stiffened by veteran officers and some old soldiers. They could not hold their position in the face of a bayonet attack, but they made the British pay a high price for the ground they took.

4. **Royal Artillery.** As the Virginians fell back, Lt. John McLeod, of the Royal Artillery, brought his two guns to this position. Opening another stage of the battle, McLeod's guns would become a decisive factor in the last part of the engagement.

5. **American Third Line.** Stationed at the far edge of this field, then considerably larger, was the third American line, composed of Continental troops—American regular army soldiers. Their story is one of repulsing a British attack, counterattacking, repulsing still another attack, and counterattacking a second time with infantry and cavalry. The final counterattack became a grim struggle with bayonet and saber, ended by McLeod's artillerymen firing into the melee. Still the fighting continued until Greene ordered the Americans to disengage.

6. **Start of the American Cavalry Charge.** From here Lt. Col. William Washington's cavalry launched its sweep against the attacking British. The monument honors Peter Francisco, probably the most famous private in the Revolutionary army. Perhaps an orphan, perhaps a child kidnapped from a wealthy home in Spain or Portugal, he was undoubtedly an immensely strong young giant. Tradition has it that in this charge, while wielding a sword large enough to do justice to a Crusader, he cut down 11 British soldiers.

7. **Last Shots by the American Riflemen.** Near here Lee's and Campbell's men, cut off from the main encounter, ended their fight, firing the last shots of the battle.

8. **Site of Guilford Courthouse.** In many parts of the rural South there were few towns away from the navigable rivers. County authorities, needing a seat of government, would pick a central location and there build a courthouse. The courthouses, and the hamlets that sometimes grew up around them, were known by the county names; thus Guilford Courthouse, the courthouse for Guilford County.