

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary War
Battle Summaries

*The Battle of
Port Royal Island*

*By
Richard E. Thomas*

The Battle of Port Royal Island (1779)
(Also Known As The Battle of Beaufort and the Battle of Grays Hill)

The Battle of Port Royal Island, fought on February 3, 1779, was one of the few Revolutionary War engagements that occurred on South Carolina's sea islands. It marked a relatively rare occasion when Patriot militia and Continental regulars joined forces to repulse a British advance in which the militia did not break and run in the face of a charge by British regulars with fixed bayonets. Though relatively small in scale, the fight at Port Royal Island embodied the resilience of the patriot cause in the face of renewed British offensives in the South.

Strategic Background

By early 1779, the Revolutionary War had entered a new phase. After setbacks in the North - including the failure to subdue New England quickly and the defeat of Burgoyne at Saratoga in 1777 - the British high command shifted its attention southward. The Ministry of War in London believed that the southern colonies contained strong Loyalist sentiment, especially in Georgia and the Carolinas, which could be harnessed to restore royal authority. If Britain could pacify the South, the strategy went, it could then roll back northward and crush the rebellion piecemeal.

In December 1778, the British successfully captured Savannah, reestablishing royal government in that colony. Emboldened, they looked across the Savannah River toward South Carolina's vulnerable sea islands and the critical port of Charleston. The islands, especially Port Royal Island with its deep harbor, were strategically valuable: they offered anchorage, abundant supplies, and staging grounds for deeper incursions to the mainland and overland to Charleston. To probe patriot defenses and encourage Loyalist sympathizers, the British dispatched an expeditionary force to Port Royal Island in January 1779.

British Objectives

The British force was led by Major William Gardner of the 60th Regiment of Foot (Royal Americans). Gardner's command consisted of several hundred regulars from the 60th and 16th Regiments of Foot - estimates range from 180 to 220 men, supported by artillery. His mission was twofold:

1. Secure Port Royal Island as a forward base.
2. Test Patriot resolve and potentially stimulate local Loyalist recruitment.

Context

If successful, the occupation of Port Royal Island would outflank the defenses of Charleston, strengthen the Royal foothold in the South and give the British a forward operating base within easy striking distance of the capital.

Guided through the inland waterways by a local planter, Andrew DeVeaux IV, who had defected to the Loyalist cause five days after Savannah had fallen, a de-masted British man-of-war, HMS Vigilant, was towed through Skull Creek behind Hilton Head Island on January 28-29, 1779 burning houses on the Patriot stronghold and stealing horses and slaves along the way. They then turned up the Broad River to bombard, burn and plunder Whitehall, the home of Thomas Heyward, Jr, before turning to the designated landing point on Port Royal Island at Laurel Bay on the land of Andrew DeVeaux, which had been offered earlier to the expedition, Reports reached Charleston on January 30, that Port Royal Island had fallen to the British.

Patriot leadership in Charleston quickly recognized the threat. As the expeditionary force was raiding DeVeaux's neighboring plantation owned by Colonel Stephen Bull, General William Moultrie, famed for his defense of Sullivan's Island in 1776, was ordered to move at one to Beaufort to counter the probe. He quickly mustered around 300 men, including a few Continental regulars and local militia. Among his officers would be Colonel Stephen Bull, a Beaufort planter, prominent Patriot, and head of the Beaufort District Militia who knew the local terrain intimately. Upon learning of the British advance, Bull had withdrawn his men from General Lincoln's encampment at Purysburg to the Port Royal Ferry crossing to await Moultrie, who arrived on January 31. On February 1, Moultrie moved the 300-man force across to Port Royal Island and into Beaufort.

Late on February 1, Gardiner's Redcoats landed and spent the next day raiding and plundering the Bull home before burning it and then taking slaves and other possessions from neighboring Patriot homes. At first light on February 2 Gardiner had sent a detachment to the Port Royal Ferry to take possession of it and prevent any Patriot forces from reaching Beaufort from that direction. At that time they were unaware of Moultrie's presence on the Island, but learned of it when they arrived there and immediately reported back to Gardiner.

Sometime late in the February 2-3 night, dispatch riders informed Moultrie of the British landing. He roused his men before dawn and marched north on the Ferry road. Coming to the top of the slight rise at Grays Hill, in the distance Moultrie could see the British column advancing. Just north of the rise, a marshy area lay south of a cleared area on both sides of the causeway between the rise and the forest.

With the enemy filing into lines on both sides of the road along the treeline about 200 yards away, Moultrie lined up his troops in the cover along the rise to the right and left of the road with two 6-pounder artillery pieces in the center on the road and one 2-pounder on the right in the woods.

The Patriot force was a diverse patchwork of units from various sources. There were members of detachments from the 2nd and 4th South Carolina Regiments, Beaufort District militiamen from north and south of the Broad River, a company of Jewish merchants from Charleston, African-American artillery crewmen, teamsters, body servants, and at least one drummer, and members of the First Families of South Carolina including two signers of the Declaration of Independence, the Captains Thomas Heyward, Jr and Edward Rutledge, who commanded the artillery.

The Battle

The engagement opened around 4:00 PM with artillery fire. Moultrie's field pieces, though handled by relatively inexperienced crews, were able to deliver telling shots into the British ranks. An early shot from the American artillery knocked out the one British field piece. The redcoats responded with volleys of musketry, advancing steadily in traditional line formation. For many of the patriot militia, this was their first true encounter with British regulars in open battle.

As the firing continued, Moultrie advanced his right and left wings nearer the swamp with supporting artillery fire on the British line, but the advantage of cover for the British in the treeline caused him to reverse direction bringing the Patriots back to their cover on the rise. Moultrie later recalled that the militia wavered briefly under the disciplined volleys, but the presence of Continental officers and the personal leadership of Colonel Bull and Captain John Barnwell steadied them. General Moultrie deployed his men in extended order, taking advantage of the cover provided by trees and fences, which blunted the effectiveness of the British line. Both sides exchanged musketry at relatively close range. The British mounted a charge with bayonets fixed, but the Patriot artillery continued to disrupt British advances, while militia rifle fire harassed their flanks. At about that time, Moultrie heard a "general cry" that his troops had few cartridges left, and he ordered that the field pieces on the road begin to "withdraw slowly, firing to cover the flanks while the Patriot lines keep pace with the artillery" - a movement which he later called "in tolerable good order for undisciplined troops".

But before Moultrie gave the order, he noticed the British ranks moving to the west of the road and beginning to withdraw toward the river. Major Gardiner's force, unable to break through and suffering mounting casualties - estimates range from

80-100 out of 200 - began to fall back. Lacking reinforcements and with no prospect of success, Gardiner had ordered a retreat toward their ships.

As the British were retreating toward Laurel Bay, the bold action of captain John Barnwell and a small group of militia dragoons almost turned the retreat into a rout. By riding around the enemy column and capturing stragglers, Barnwell gave the impression of vigorous pursuit and nearly panicked Gardiner. He captured 21 men, including the son of the Governor of Bermuda (who later escaped), and was given a field promotion to Major for his action.

Aftermath of the Battle

The British withdrew to their vessels and reembarked, abandoning the attempt to secure Port Royal Island. Patriot forces held the field, marking a clear victory for Moultrie and his men.

Casualties were modest for the Patriots but telling for the British:

- British: roughly 80-100 or wounded (about 50%).
- Americans: about 8 killed and 22 wounded (about 10%).

The Patriot victory at Grays Hill was heralded as a signal that disciplined American forces could stand up to the mightiest Army in the world, and win. It would be recognized by history as the first land-based victory by American forces, largely militia, against British regulars in the war in South Carolina.

Significance

Though small in scale, the Battle of Port Royal Island carried symbolic and strategic weight:

1. **Patriot Morale:** Coming on the heels of Savannah's fall, the victory reassured South Carolinians that the cause was not lost.
2. **Local Leadership:** The contributions of figures like Colonel Stephen Bull underscored the importance of native leadership in mobilizing resistance.
3. **Testing Militia:** The battle proved that militia, often derided as unreliable, could fight effectively alongside Continentals.
4. **British Miscalculation:** The failure emphasized the limits of strong Loyalist allegiances in the Lowcountry and foreshadowed the difficulties Britain would face in sustaining its southern strategy.

The Battle of Port Royal Island exemplifies the dynamics of the Revolutionary War in the South for the Americans: small engagements, heavy reliance on militia, and the constant interplay between local knowledge and imperial strategy. That February afternoon in 1779, South Carolina a diverse collection of Patriots, farmers and soldiers alike, proved that they could defend their homeland. The victory did not halt Britain's southern campaign, but it preserved patriot control of Port Royal and inspired resistance that would endure through the darkest days of the war.

In retrospect, the clash at Port Royal Island is emblematic of the clear fact that the Revolutionary War was not won by grand, decisive battles alone. It was sustained by local men defending local ground, whose aggregated courage added up to a national advantage in our struggle for Independence.