



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Battle Summaries

Siege of Fort Balfour

By
Richard E. Thomas

The Siege of Fort Balfour Pocotaligo, SC - April 14, 1781

In the wake of Charleston's fall, the British Crown declared the colony conquered, and many Lowcountry residents, including prominent planters, were compelled to take loyalty oaths. Many Carolina patriots initially refused the oath and went into hiding as the South Carolina military forces virtually disbanded. But the tide soon began to shift as the resistance reorganized under guerrilla commanders, one of whom in Beaufort District was William Harden.

In the late summer of 1780, Harden emerged as a Patriot leader of a company of Rangers in the southern Lowcountry. Commissioned as a colonel of South Carolina state troops by Governor John Rutledge, he formed a mobile force composed primarily of mounted militia drawn from the plantations and pine forests of what is today Jasper, Hampton, and Beaufort Counties. Harden's mobile command often operated with minimal supplies and relied on hit-and-run tactics and local intelligence to avoid direct confrontation with superior British and Loyalist forces. His success was due in no small part to his familiarity with the geography of the Lowcountry which he used in developing his unconventional tactics. He used the tidal creeks, swamps, and dense woods to his advantage, frequently striking quickly and withdrawing before British reinforcements could arrive. He also enjoyed the support of local Patriot sympathizers, including planters, enslaved individuals who served as guides and scouts, and small farmers who opposed Loyalist dominance.

In Late March and early April of 1781, numerous small encounters occurred in Beaufort District along the Kings Highway, many of them involving Harden's Rangers and various SC Loyalist units. Soon after the action at Red Hill, which was their third defeat within a week near the Salkehatchie River, Harden's men were regrouping in the pine forest when they learned that SC Loyalist Captain Edward Fenwick, commander of the forces that had just bested them at Salkehatchie Causeway, and his 35 mounted dragoons were at Fort Balfour on the Pocotaligo River.

Harden wanted to surprise Fenwick and headed toward Balfour, but Fenwick learned of Harden's plan through an informant and started marching toward Harden's avenue of approach. Harden had his own informant, who told him that Fenwick was headed his way, but Harden had reason to doubt his loyalties and did not believe him. In the dark, the two advance elements met and hailed each other and a charge was ordered. They came together on the west side of the high narrow

causeway leading to Salkehatchie Bridge, where the British, after a prolonged fight, managed to get past the Patriots and headed back toward Fort Balfour.

Fort Balfour, near the town of Pocotaligo, was garrisoned by a few British regulars and Loyalist troops and controlled access to the South Carolina interior and a main approach to Beaufort from the upper Pocotaligo River and bridge crossing along the high road to Charleston, the Kings Highway. With approximately 85 men, Harden approached the fort under cover of darkness and surrounded its defenses by placing his men at much greater than the usual intervals. When the envelopment was in place, he sent Captain Tarleton Brown with a detachment of 13 men to taunt the defenders and entice the enemy from the fort.

At the time Harden was engaged with the fort, the despised Loyalist Captain Edward Fenwick and Colonel Nicholas Lechmere, of Beaufort, the commanders of the fort, were absent visiting soldiers wounded a few days earlier at a makeshift field hospital near Van Bibber's Tavern, a short distance east of the fort. With Harden's men concealed in the underbrush, as the two officers and their nine-man detachment returned to the fort from the tavern, they were captured quickly and silently by the Patriots. With the fort's commanders in irons, and claiming a force more than twice its actual size, Harden called for the surrender of the fort from its officer in charge, Lt. Col. William Kelsall, and Kelsall immediately refused. The Loyalists in the surrounded fort initially formed for a charge to break out of the besieged compound, but when Harden's men stood fast, they did not charge and returned into the fort.

Many of the Loyalist defenders in the fort were from Beaufort and Colleton Districts and were friends and even relatives of Harden's men, and recent British and Loyalist abuses in the region had begun to influence the development of Patriot sympathies among them. Cut off from reinforcements and besieged by what they believed was a much larger force, the defenders mutinied and forced the surrender. Lt. Col. Kelsall led the roughly 110 men out the sallyport of the fort in a line, and while the officers tied their horses to fenceposts, the men in line stacked their arms in surrender. Given the circumstances and the relationships among the men, Harden and his men worked all night to process the prisoners, parole them, arrange for transportation, and send them on their way, while the officers were temporarily detained.

While the fort was being occupied by the Patriots the following morning, Harden received a report that a large column, approaching from the Charleston direction with a strong Loyalist contingent, the Royal Foresters, led by Beaufort resident Andrew DeVeaux, had crossed the Salkehatchie and was headed to Fort Balfour. Believing

that his men could be trapped with their backs to the river and an envelopment of the fort could be accomplished, Harden ordered the fort abandoned, released the officers, and destroyed and had the cannon thrown into a nearby creek to prevent their future use.

Following the excessive British and Loyalist abuses of the area's residents, this victory, though relatively small in scale, provided a crucial morale boost to the Patriot cause in the region and effectively ended British control in the Beaufort District. Following the capitulation of Fort Balfour, Harden's fame grew, his cunning and mastery of deception was celebrated, and his force expanded. His men, often referred to as "Harden's Rangers", engaged in frequent skirmishes with Loyalist bands and British patrols across the lower part of the state. In coordination with Francis Marion and other militia leaders, Harden's operations were part of a broader Patriot strategy of irregular warfare that kept British forces stretched thin and constantly harassed in their rear areas. In 1782, as British forces began to withdraw from South Carolina in preparation for the end of the war, Harden's units continued to press against remaining Loyalist elements.