



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Battle Summaries

*Battle of
Coosawhatchie and
Tulifinny Hill*

*By
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Battle of Coosawhatchie and Tullifinny Hill

Following the British capture of Savannah at the end of December 1778, American General Benjamin Lincoln moved about 3,000 men of his army from encampment at Purrysburg, SC toward Augusta on April 20, 1779 to attempt a defense of that strategic strongpoint. General William Moultrie was left with HQ at Purrysburg with roughly 1,200 men scattered throughout Beaufort District, many of whom deserted or returned to protect their homes. Lt. Col. Lachlan McIntosh, with about 300 men, was left in charge at Purrysburg by Moultrie, who had moved north to explore the British presence near the Black Swamp (near present-day Garnett, SC) and locate closer to Lincoln in support. Early the morning of April 29, 1779, the Patriot camp was surprised by the Redcoats under Lt. Col. John Maitland. Opening shots were fired, the Patriots scattered and McIntosh ordered the retreat. The remaining Patriot troops fled toward Coosawhatchie, and Moultrie, learning of the Purrysburg defeat, abandoned his Black Swamp camp to rendezvous with McIntosh at Coosawhatchie.

In the meantime, Lincoln had begun a withdrawal to Charleston through Beaufort District, and Moultrie hurried to close ranks with Lincoln, conducting a fighting retreat as they moved. Moultrie had requested artillery from Governor Rutledge, but neither Rutledge, Lincoln nor Moultrie thought that Prevost would advance to Charleston, and no artillery came. Moultrie's army had crossed the Coosawhatchie River and was enroute to Pocotaligo when word came to Lincoln that the British were closing. Moultrie established a main defensive line at Tullifinny Hill, a small hill overlooking the Coosawhatchie River roughly two miles east of it and left a small guard of about 100 hand-picked men at the Coosawhatchie bridge to provide early warning of the British arrival and delay their advance if possible.

On May 3rd, Lt. Col. John Laurens and a 250-man detachment of the North Carolina Light Infantry were sent by Lincoln to bring back the Patriot rear guard before the British cut them off. Laurens, known widely for his rash and impetuous nature, had volunteered to lead the detachment and, instead of simply leading the rear guard back to the main line and following Moultrie's orders, he decided to make a stand and positioned his men on a slight rise near the bridge on the Coosawhatchie River's east bank. Roughly 350 Americans were now guarding the crossing against an expected assault by about 2,500 British soldiers and Loyalists.

The British sharpshooters took shelter in houses on the west side of the river and poured disciplined musket fire and long-range artillery at the Patriots, pinning the Americans down, who were powerless to do anything. Laurens was seriously wounded in the arm and his horse was killed by artillery fragments. Under heavy fire, Captain William Hazzard Wigg brought his horse, Independence, an 18 hand-high Roan known to

be the fastest and strongest horse in the Beaufort District cavalry, and loaded Laurens onto his horse and galloped to the rear where Laurens received medical attention. On his arrival at Tulifinny Hill, Laurens told Lincoln that the Patriots could not adequately defend their position there in the face of Prevost's overwhelming strength and superiority in numbers and weaponry.

On his departure, Laurens told Captain Thomas Shubrick to maintain their position, but once Lt. Col. Laurens had left, recognizing that if they stayed they would be enveloped and captured, Shubrick ordered a tactical withdrawal. With many of the Patriots casualties, they fell back in disarray to the Tullifinny River. Moultrie was forced to abandon his position at Tulifinny Hill and continue his retreat to Charleston. After the army had crossed the Tulifinny, Moultrie ordered that the bridge planks be destroyed and the stringers set on fire. When the British arrived at the position, they had to cross the river on charred and still heated stringers.

The disaster at Coosawhatchie and retreat of American forces left the Beaufort District militia completely discouraged and demoralized. Moultrie wrote from his camp at the Ashepoo River that most of the Beaufort and Colleton regiments had deserted his command.

By not following Moultrie's orders Laurens had squandered an opportunity to further delay the British advance and allow Moultrie to reinforce his position. In his papers, Moultrie described Laurens as a brave soldier but an "imprudent officer" whose actions were unnecessarily dangerous. Laurens was the son of Henry Laruens, past President of Continental Congress, and would live to continue his distinguished Patriot service, but he would die in action in Beaufort District at the 1782 Battle of Tar Bluff as the last field-grade American officer killed in the war. At the time of the Coosawhatchie battle, Laurens was campaigning to raise a Regiment of enslaved black men to strengthen South Carolina's military capability – a plan ultimately rejected by the State legislature despite the growing British threat.