

Beaufort County 250 Committee Battle Summaries

The Battle of Combahee Ferry aka Battle of Combahee River, Battle of Tar Bluff, and Battle of Chehaw Point)

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SC250
ANNIVERSARY
American Revolution

BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

Battle of Combahee Ferry
(aka Battle of Combahee River, Battle of Tar Bluff and Battle of Chehaw Point)
August 27, 1782

British forces occupying Charleston had essentially been under siege since late 1781 due to the activity of General Nathanael Greene's forces in the area. British General Alexander Leslie requested a truce in March 1782 and permission to purchase food for his garrison and for the inhabitants of the city. When Greene refused, General Leslie announced his intention to resume his armed forays to seize provisions by force. To oppose the British forays, Greene placed a 300-man light brigade of infantry and cavalry under the command of General Mordecai Gist of Maryland to patrol the territory south of the Edisto River.

On August 21, General Leslie sent out two foraging expeditions. One went to St. Helena's Parish, and the other, under Major William Brereton, went up the Combahee River by boat in search of rice to feed their garrison. When Greene learned of the British movements, he sent Gist's force to the Combahee to oppose Brereton. Gist arrived at the north bank of the river on August 25, but Brereton had already arrived, landed and taken control of the ferry. On August 26, Gist learned that 300 of Brereton's men had crossed the river, so he sent a detachment over with orders to attack the British before sunrise the next morning.

Colonel John Laurens, who had just arrived on August 26 from his station outside Charleston, requested that Gist give him orders to take an additional small force further downriver to man a redoubt at Chehaw Point, where they could fire on the British as they retreated to the sea. Gist placed fifty Delaware infantrymen and an artillery captain by the name of James Smith with a howitzer and crew under Laurens' command. Laurens and his troops stopped for the night at a plantation house near the Combahee River, the home of a friend of Laurens, and they left at about 3:00 am on August 27 to march toward Chehaw Point.

The British, in anticipation of Gist's maneuvers, had quietly drifted some boats downriver, and shortly before Laurens's detachment could reach the redoubt, 140 British soldiers had already prepared an ambush about one mile from Chehaw Point, concealing themselves in tall grass along the road. Between the two British redoubts, and closer to the southern one, a road paralleled the water's edge, threading its way through high grass and scrub oak leading to Chehaw Point. It was along this road that the American column advanced—and where the decisive ambush would be sprung. The river itself ran broad and slow in the morning light, forming a natural barrier on one flank and anchoring the defensive line. The

ground was a mixture of sandy road, marshy verge, tall river grass, and rising bluffs—typical of the Lowcountry's tidal river systems.

The British positions had been carefully chosen. The northern redoubt, placed at the narrower, upper bend of the river at the east side of the ferry crossing along the Kings Highway, commanded the approaches from upriver and offered observation over a long stretch of water. The southern redoubt, at Chehaw Point and more immediately relevant to the battle itself, occupied slightly elevated ground near the next river bend downriver. Built of earth and timber, it had been hastily constructed and was garrisoned by roughly 150 men. Its field of fire swept the road and the open river and grassland leading up from the south.

Between these two fortified points lay the key to the British plan: an ambush force of about 140 men concealed in the tall river grass alongside the road at a point known as Tar Bluff. The grass grew shoulder-high in places, thick and wind-stirred, masking movement and hiding red-coated forms. This ambush detachment was positioned nearer to the downstream redoubt than the northern one, and formed a trap designed to strike an advancing force just before it came within range of the fortification.

The American force approached in column along the sandy road, its march measured but purposeful. Leading the column was Colonel John Laurens, mounted and conspicuous, wearing the uniform of a Continental officer distinguished by a large white plume in his hat. Behind him marched infantrymen on foot, their bayonets at the ready, and accompanying them was a single small field piece—a six-pounder cannon—being brought forward with effort along the uneven road.

The American intent appears to have been to strike the southern redoubt directly. As the American column drew nearer to the southern bend, the river glinting behind and to their left, the concealed British ambush lay silent in the grass. The tall reeds muffled sound and obscured vision. The British soldiers waited until the American vanguard was well within effective musket range. Then, at a signal, the ambush erupted.

When the enemy rose to fire, despite the British having superior numbers and the stronger position Laurens led an immediate charge. While not all sources agree as to whether Laurens ordered his men to attack before leading the charge, the battle was engaged as Laurens became the point of the spear. The British immediately opened fire, and in the first volley, Laurens fell from his horse mortally wounded. The artillery captain, Smith, also fell, riddled with bullets. as did others, and the American troops retreated in disarray, leaving the howitzer behind.

Gist, who had discovered the British departure at 4:00 am, was less than two miles away and quickly approaching, leading 150 cavalry to reinforce Laurens's force. According to William McKennan, a captain under Laurens's command, Laurens had appeared "anxious to attack the enemy previous to the main body coming up," gambling that his troops, "although few in numbers, [would be] sufficient to enable him to gain a laurel for his brow" before the end of the fighting. McKennan's opinion was that Laurens "wanted to do all himself, and have all the honor."

Gist arrived with the cavalry in time to cover a retreat, but he was unable to recover the howitzer or dislodge the British from their position. The British eventually returned to their boats and withdrew downriver while Gist dealt with the aftermath of the battle. Laurens, the last American field-grade officer to be killed in action in the entire war, and one other American died on the field, and 19 more were wounded in the last significant battle in Beaufort District during the war.

Unable to stop the foraging along the Combahee, Gist turned his attention to the St Helena Island foraging party and rode south with his 200 remaining men. With scouts tracking the movement of the British on their raid, Gist proceeded to the Port Royal Ferry crossing anticipating the British raiding party would arrive there. On September 2, the British on land, along with the galleys *HMS Balfour* and *HMS Shark* as escorts and transports turned into the Coosaw River. Abruptly, and at close range, Gist fired on the ships with his artillery piece. Both ships slipped their cables and tried to escape. The *Balfour* quickly ran aground, with its crew spiking the guns and abandoning the ship, and though *Shark* escaped she was badly damaged. The Patriots captured the *Balfour*, along with her cargo of beef, rice, and poultry. She was later repaired, outfitted with new guns, and was put into service with the American navy.

Only three more battles would take place in the South Carolina Lowcountry in the following three months as the Patriots and Continentals closed in on Charles Town, and in mid-December the British would begin evacuating the strategic strongpoint marking the end of formal warfare in the South.