

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Stories of Beaufort District
In the Revolutionary War

*Burial Practices
In Revolutionary Era
Beaufort District*

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American Revolution

BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

Burials During and After Wartime in the American Revolution In Beaufort District

The customary burial protocol during wartime and after in the American Revolution was dependent on a number of often convergent factors. The cause of death [or severity of wound leading to death], location of death, landscape and battle terrain, battle situation or outcome, combatant rank, socio-economic status, logistics, and type of combat unit were typical determining factors regarding burial. Generally, burials conformed to the following practices.

Whether a combatant was killed in action during a battle, or severely wounded and died of wounds in a field hospital, or died during the war off-duty at home or after the war in peacetime, or died during the war on-duty in a military encampment was a primary factor determining how and where a burial would take place.

Then, was the battle situation or outcome a victory with the victor holding the field, a stalemate with both sides withdrawing, an orderly withdrawal in defeat, or a rout with the loser fleeing in fear? And, whether the casualty was on the winning or losing side had a powerful role in determining type and location of burial.

In a situation where the Patriot victor held the ground, enemy bodies were either left lying where they fell or buried in mass graves. Patriot bodies would be either buried where they fell or removed to a nearby encampment and interred in a temporary military cemetery. In a stalemate withdrawal, both sides would remove as many bodies as they could in retrograde movement and others would be left where they fell. In a withdrawal in defeat or a rout, bodies would be left in place where they fell.

In all cases, burial of bodies left on the field after battle would be at the discretion of the victor. In relatively rare cases, bodies of defeated officers would be buried in single graves. In only one known case, bodies of British officers killed in battle were given proper military burials by Patriot officers in a cemetery in a marked grave.

Also, was the battle landscape heavily wooded or marshy and overgrown preventing uncomplicated recovery of dead and wounded, or was it an open field without cover or obstacles making recovery relatively easy? The type of terrain had a major effect on burial location or ability to recover bodies. Unrecoverable bodies were, de facto, left where they fell and most likely not buried.

The type of unit the combatant was in had a strong part in burial determination. If a casualty was in a highly mobile company (usually a dragoon or ranger unit) and was killed or wounded, recovery for burial would be complicated and unpredictable. If a

combatant was in a relatively static (artillery or infantry unit) recovery of dead and wounded was more assured.

Rank also was a factor. Officers typically received burial in single graves, marked with a symbol of rank, while rank and file soldiers usually were buried at or near where they fell in battle in shallow, mass graves normally about 16 inches deep.

Logistics and social status would also figured prominently in determining burial type and location. Distance and availability of transportation from battle site to desired burial location, especially for combatant members of elite social families who could pay for special handling of remains, was another critical consideration. For British or Hessian officers, distance and transport time precluded burial in the homeland and required expeditious and anonymous handling for burial in enemy or occupied territory. Rank and file soldiers in British units were either left where they fell or buried in shallow, mass graves.

Finally, combatants who died in field hospitals of contagious diseases, like smallpox and typhus, or dysentery and, in some cases sepsis, were immediately thrown into trenches away from the campground, burned en masse and later covered with dirt to prevent spreading the disease.

For Beaufort District Patriot and Loyalist combatants, killed in action or dying of wounds from battle while in the field, burials were nearly exclusively determined in keeping with the foregoing practices. As there were very few churchyard cemeteries or public burial grounds at the time - fewer than six in the District as of 1776 - combatants who died off-duty at home during the war or after the war in peacetime tended to be buried in family plots on private land. Except in the wealthiest families, markers were typically impermanent and made of wood, so evidence of gravesites tended to disappear over the years.

Few of the original gravesites, not in cemeteries preserved as family or church burial grounds over the years, have survived, and the exact or approximate location of most original homesites are unknown. Development, landfill and road construction have likely claimed many unknown Patriot graves, while in remote overgrown areas, some probably exist in tangled undergrowth. Perhaps, in open fields along old roadways or on the land of hunting plantations in the area, mass graves from skirmishes along the old Kings Highway are waiting to be discovered. Drone technology and remote ground penetrating radar may one day reveal the truth.