

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Battle Summaries

Conflict in the Salkehatchie Corridor

During the American Revolution 1780-1782

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Conflict in the Salkehatchie Corridor During the American Revolution 1780–1782

The fighting along South Carolina's Salkehatchie River during the closing years of the American Revolution was not a series of unrelated backcountry skirmishes. From 1780 through 1782, the river - known variously in contemporary records as Saltketcher, Saltcatcher, Salt Hetcher, and Salkehatchie - formed one of the most strategically important corridors between Charleston and Savannah. Northwest of modern Yemassee, the inland flow of the river is called Salkehatchie or Salketchers, which was its name at the time of the Revolution. Downstream into the coastal area, it is known as the Combahee. Its broad swamps, limited crossings, narrow causeways, bridges, and adjoining plantations made it both an obstacle to military movement and a natural defensive line. Armies and partisan forces repeatedly returned to the same ground because a principal overland route between Charleston and Savannah had to negotiate this difficult landscape.

The 1780 Actions

The strategic importance of the Salkehatchie became especially apparent during the British campaign against Charleston in the spring of 1780. General Sir Henry Clinton had brought a large expeditionary force from New York and landed south of Charleston, while British troops already occupying Georgia were ordered northward to reinforce him. Brigadier General James Paterson commanded the column moving from Georgia toward Charleston. Its route carried it through the lower South Carolina countryside and directly toward the Salkehatchie crossing.

The Americans lacked sufficient regular troops to stop Paterson in open battle. Instead, local South Carolina militia adopted a delaying strategy. Roads were obstructed with felled trees, boats were removed or destroyed, bridges were damaged, and mounted parties watched the British advance. The objective was not necessarily to defeat Paterson but to slow his movement while Charleston prepared for the siege developing around it.

Among the officers directing this resistance was James Ladson (1753–1812), an experienced South Carolina officer who would later become lieutenant governor of the state. Ladson had served in the Continental establishment before returning to militia service and was closely connected with the Colleton County Regiment. By March 1780 he was operating with approximately eighty Colleton militiamen in front of Paterson's column.

On March 16, British and Loyalist troops were foraging at McPherson's plantation, near modern McPhersonville. Patrick Ferguson's corps, including the Loyalist American Volunteers, was moving north from the Savannah River toward Charleston. They reached Isaac McPherson's plantation after learning that about 50 mounted Patriots had recently been there. Ferguson sent men after them, but the mounted Americans escaped. McPherson himself was described in the British account as a wealthy and committed Patriot.

The British remained at McPherson's for several days, apparently March 14–17, 1780. On March 16, Lt. Anthony Allaire recorded that about thirty Patriots appeared roughly a mile and a half away. British troops pursued them but could not catch the mounted men. During this occupation,

Major Charles Cochrane approached with another British/Loyalist detachment. Ferguson's men apparently mistook Cochrane's force for Americans and fired on them. Ferguson was slightly wounded. So, the event commonly listed as the “Skirmish at McPherson’s Plantation” was actually an accidental engagement between Crown forces rather than a conventional Patriot-versus-British fight.

As importantly, McPherson’s Plantation was the staging point immediately preceding the Salkehatchie action. Allaire records that Ferguson's force marched from McPherson's plantation to the Saltketcher River, where Patriot militia attempted to prevent the British crossing. The following day the contest intensified as Patriot Major James Ladson’s men reconnoitered the British advance and continued obstructing the approaches to the Saltketcher crossing. British Legion officer Captain Abraham DePeyster was among the officers directing the pursuit. The British Legion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, was then moving through the region as part of the British concentration against Charleston.

By March 18 Ladson had selected his principal defensive position. His approximately eighty militiamen occupied the north side of the Salkehatchie at the principal road crossing. The bridge had been destroyed. One account places some of Ladson’s men in or around a tavern on the opposite bank, from which they could fire on anyone attempting to restore or force the crossing. The terrain made the position considerably stronger than the small number of defenders might suggest. The Salkehatchie was surrounded by extensive swamp. Allaire described British soldiers marching through water two and three feet deep in miserable weather. A destroyed bridge in such terrain could hold up wagons, artillery, baggage, horses, and infantry even if a few determined soldiers managed to wade or swim across.

The British avoided a direct assault across the destroyed bridge. Part of the British Legion remained opposite Ladson and exchanged fire with his men, fixing the Americans’ attention on what appeared to be the obvious crossing. Meanwhile British light infantry and the remainder of the advance force moved downstream. There they succeeded in crossing the river and swamp and then worked their way back toward Ladson’s rear. Suddenly threatened from behind as well as from across the river, the Beaufort-Colleton militia could no longer maintain its position. British troops attacked at close range. Allaire reported that a Captain Mills and sixteen privates were killed, apparently many of them by bayonet. Other Americans escaped into the surrounding country.

The action did not end when Ladson’s immediate position collapsed. The British still had to get Paterson’s army, baggage, and equipment across the river. That operation consumed much of the next two days while local militia continued to harass the crossing. Captain William Sanders, commander of the Round O Company of the Colleton County Regiment, appears to have remained active nearby. Sanders was a substantial St. Bartholomew Parish planter whose property was associated with Round O and Pon Pon, making this essentially home-ground resistance by local militia.

On March 20, as New York Loyalist Volunteers were recovering boats used in the crossing and placing them back on their carriages, Patriot marksmen fired from across the river. Three New York Volunteers were killed. The incident delayed the British again while bridges and roads

were repaired. Paterson's army advanced only about seven miles that day before camping at a place Allaire called Godfrey's Savannah.

The British had won the operational contest. They forced the Salkehatchie line and continued toward Charleston. Paterson's troops were urgently needed by Clinton, who was tightening the siege around the city. The Salkehatchie fighting therefore did not prevent the fall of Charleston in May 1780, but it demonstrated why the river crossings mattered. A relatively small militia force had delayed a much larger British column because geography concentrated military movement onto a few roads, bridges, and causeways.

And the landscape itself helps fix the location of the battle. After breaking Ladson's position, the British camped at what Allaire called "Ogelveys' plantation," on the side of the river locally known as Indian Land. The reference concerns the extensive Ogilvie holdings in the land adjacent to the Salkehatchie-Combahee river. In this context, the 1780 action can be understood as a movement from McPherson's plantation toward the destroyed Saltketcher bridge, followed by the British downstream flanking crossing, the destruction of Ladson's position, and the establishment of the British advance on the Indian Land side of the river.

The 1781 Actions

A year later the strategic situation was dramatically different. Charleston remained in British hands, but British control of the South Carolina interior was collapsing. Patriot forces under Nathanael Greene, Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, Andrew Pickens, and others were attacking British posts and communications throughout the state. The Charleston-Savannah road, once the route by which Paterson had marched north, now became a vulnerable British lifeline.

Into this struggle came Lieutenant Colonel William Harden. Harden, operating with Marion's approval, organized a body of mounted militia in the southern part of South Carolina's Beaufort and Colleton Districts and began attacking British and Loyalist communications and control between Charleston, Beaufort, and Savannah. His command included men from the southern districts and some from Georgia and fluctuated considerably in size. By early April 1781 he had approximately one hundred men available for operations around the Salkehatchie. Opposing Harden was Captain Edward Fenwick, a wealthy South Carolina planter and determined Loyalist who commanded approximately thirty-five South Carolina Light Dragoons. Fenwick's men were fewer than Harden's, but they were disciplined, mounted troops accustomed to operating together.

At about midnight on April 5, Harden encountered Fenwick near Patterson's Bridge over the Salkehatchie. One of Harden's men, the young Paul Hamilton - later governor of South Carolina and United States secretary of the navy - left an account of the encounter. Harden attempted to engage the Loyalists, but darkness and confusion disrupted his larger force. Fenwick's dragoons counterattacked vigorously with their sabers and dispersed the Patriots. Hamilton remembered roughly fifteen of Harden's men suffering severe saber wounds. The encounter demonstrated that Harden's numerical superiority meant little if his loosely organized militia could not be controlled in darkness and difficult terrain.

Harden did not abandon the campaign. Instead, he remained in the region and began to attack the Loyalist network surrounding the Salkehatchie in a systematic manner. On April 7, at a place called Four Holes, northeast of the Combahee River, Harden encountered a Loyalist muster. He captured a captain and twenty-five men and paroled them. He then continued southward. The following night he approached a small Loyalist position at Red Hill, approximately two miles east of Saltketcher Bridge, commanded by Captain John Barton.

Harden detached Major John Cooper with fifteen men. Cooper surrounded Barton's position and demanded its surrender. Barton refused. A sharp firefight followed. Despite having only about six men, Barton resisted determinedly. Eventually, three Loyalists were killed, two more were captured, and Barton was wounded so severely that he subsequently died. Cooper was slightly wounded, as was another Patriot. Harden also lost a young militiaman whom he identified only as Stewart, describing him admiringly as a "fine youth" who rushed forward and was killed.

Harden then learned that Fenwick and his thirty-five dragoons were at Pocotaligo. He decided to surprise them. Fenwick, however, had received intelligence that Harden was nearby and was simultaneously attempting to surprise him. Their advance parties met on the road. Harden ordered his men into the woods, apparently intending to form an ambush. The maneuver went wrong: many of his men moved too deeply into the woods and could not be recalled promptly. Fenwick initially drew back. Believing the Loyalists were retreating, Harden rushed his available men back onto the road, and suddenly Fenwick wheeled his dragoons around and charged. Again Harden's men gave way. Harden reported one man captured and two wounded. Fenwick lost one killed and seven wounded, and Harden captured two more Loyalist dragoons the following morning. Although Harden had again failed to defeat Fenwick decisively, the Loyalists had suffered meaningful losses and did not destroy Harden's command.

The significance of these encounters becomes clearer when they are viewed as successive stages of a purposeful campaign, rather than isolated skirmishes. Harden had fought at Four Holes, Red Hill, Saltketcher Bridge, and the Pocotaligo road while moving through the very corridor that the British had used in 1780. His objective was increasingly obvious: the British-Loyalist post at Pocotaligo known as Fort Balfour.

After the second encounter with Fenwick, Harden withdrew approximately ten miles into the swamp and rested his men. Smarting from three successive defeats at the hand of the Loyalists, he conceived a plan to reduce Fort Balfour and advanced rapidly toward Pocotaligo. When he came within sight of Fort Balfour, circumstances suddenly turned in his favor. Fenwick and Colonel Nicholas Lechmere, one of the senior Loyalist officers associated with the post, were outside the fort near Van Bibber's Tavern when Harden's men captured them along with seven dragoons.

Deprived of important officers, the garrison was vulnerable. Harden had his men surround the fort, keeping the line interval nearly triple the normal distance and giving the impression of a much larger force than actually was assembled. He then sent an officer under flag demanding surrender. The Loyalists initially refused. Harden then sent a detachment of about a dozen men on horseback outside the fort entrance, trying to entice the defenders to leave the garrison to pursue them. No response followed, so Harden issued a threat to storm the position if necessary.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelsall, left in command, requested time to consider. Harden allowed only twenty minutes.

Many of the Loyalist defenders in the fort were friends and relatives of the men in Harden's force, and when Kelsall voiced his intention to resist, they mutinied and forced the garrison's surrender. Harden reported taking a militia colonel, a major, three captains, three lieutenants, sixty militia privates, a dragoon lieutenant, and twenty-two dragoons with their horses. The prisoners marched outside the abatis and stacked their arms. Harden occupied the fort and then destroyed it when he received a message that a large force of Loyalist reinforcements was approaching from Charleston.

The fall of Fort Balfour transformed the meaning of the preceding Salkehatchie fighting. Harden had suffered tactical reverses against Fenwick, but strategically his campaign succeeded. The Loyalist defensive network between the Salkehatchie and Pocotaligo had been penetrated, its detachments defeated or dispersed, its cavalry commander captured, and its principal fortified post eliminated. The destruction of the main British-Loyalist control point for access to Beaufort and Beaufort District meant the virtual end to British domination of the area for the rest of the war.

The Salkehatchie nevertheless remained contested. On May 12, 1781, Harden wrote Marion that he had sent a detachment into what he called "Fort Saltkecher." His men, he reported, killed two Loyalists and captured a Captain Jones, whom Harden subsequently paroled. The editors of the Francis Marion Papers note that this reference could conceivably describe the earlier April 5 encounter, but the details do not agree with the known Harden-Fenwick fight. It very well may preserve evidence of a separate action at a fortified position near Saltketcher.

The 1782 Actions

By 1782 the character of the war had changed again. British forces were increasingly confined to Charleston and a shrinking coastal perimeter, but Loyalist communities remained active in parts of the Lowcountry. The Salkehatchie country contained a particularly persistent Loyalist population, and the conflict there became increasingly local and personal.

During the spring an uneasy truce existed between Patriot and Loyalist inhabitants around Saltketchers. Among the Loyalist leaders were Captain Tenison Cheshire, Captain Jones, and Captain Oldfield. The arrangement collapsed on May 25 when Captain William Goodwyn, commanding eighteen Patriot militiamen from the Camden District Regiment, attempted to seize Cheshire and carry him to Nathanael Greene's headquarters. The attempt failed and produced another Saltketcher's clash. Unlike the large military movement of March 1780 or Harden's campaign of April 1781, this was essentially civil warfare between armed South Carolinians in a neighborhood where political allegiance remained bitterly divided.

Even in the final months of the war the Salkehatchie swamps remained dangerous. In October 1782, following the fighting along the Combahee a month earlier, Captain John Carter led a Patriot volunteer scout force toward Dean's Swamp to break up a Loyalist gathering. At Saltketcher Swamp his men were ambushed by approximately twenty-five Loyalists under

Captain Tenison Cheshire. Carter's force suffered an unknown number of casualties but fought back and eventually drove the Loyalists into the swamp. By then the strategic outcome was no longer seriously in doubt. British evacuation of Charleston was about to begin, and on December 14, 1782 the last British regulars and thousands of Loyalists finally departed the city. But the persistence of fighting at Saltketcher up until the evacuation demonstrates how deeply the Revolution had divided this part of South Carolina.

Conclusion

Over three years the Salkehatchie had witnessed several distinct phases of the Southern war. In March 1780 James Ladson, William Sanders, Captain Mills, and the Colleton militia used the river and swamp as a defensive barrier against Paterson's British column moving north to reinforce the siege of Charleston. They failed to stop the invasion, but their destroyed bridge, harassment, and continued resistance impactfully delayed a much larger army.

In April 1781 the direction of military pressure reversed. William Harden came south through the same corridor, fighting Edward Fenwick's Loyalist dragoons at Saltketcher Bridge and Patterson's Bridge, attacking John Barton at Red Hill, and ultimately breaking the Loyalist position at Fort Balfour. The road that had carried British reinforcements toward Charleston in 1780 became a route by which Patriot partisans dismantled British control in 1781.

Finally, in 1782, Saltketchers became the scene of a more localized but equally revealing civil conflict. William Goodwyn, Tenison Cheshire, John Carter, and their followers fought not as components of large armies but as neighbors divided by allegiance, operating in a countryside where truces, raids, ambushes, paroles, and personal vendettas continued even as the larger British war effort collapsed.

The geography explains the persistence of the fighting. The Salkehatchie was both boundary and highway, barrier and gateway. Its swamp protected defenders but forced travelers toward bridges and causeways. The road through Saltketchers connected the Charleston country and Pocotaligo, Beaufort, Coosawhatchie, and ultimately Savannah. Whoever wished to control movement between the two great British-held ports had to reckon with this crossing.

For that reason, the Salkehatchie actions should not be regarded simply as a collection of obscure skirmishes. Taken together, they form a remarkably representative illustration of the changing Revolution in the South Carolina Lowcountry: first a conventional British invasion opposed by militia delaying tactics; then an aggressive Patriot partisan counteroffensive against British communications; and finally a bitter local civil war between Patriot and Loyalist communities as imperial control disintegrated. The same river, road, bridge, swamp, plantations, and causeways served each successive phase. In 1780 British soldiers struggled through waist-deep water to turn Ladson's defensive position. In 1781 Harden and Fenwick maneuvered their mounted men through the same corridor while fighting for control of the Charleston-Savannah road. In 1782 Cheshire and Carter were still fighting among the Saltketcher swamps while the British prepared to abandon Charleston. The Salkehatchie had remained strategically important because the landscape remained the same. What changed was who controlled it, and who was advancing through it.