

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Battle Summaries

Combahee River Campaign Phase II

August 28 - September 6, 1782

From The Combahee To the Action at Port Royal Ferry and Beyond

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SC 250 ANNIVERSARY American Revolution | BEAUFORT COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA

Combahee River Campaign - Phase II
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By the morning of August 28, 1782, the British expedition commanded by Major William Brereton had survived its most dangerous encounter, but its mission was not over. The previous day, British troops had fought American forces along the lower Combahee River at Tar Bluff on Chehaw Neck. Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens had been killed, and Brigadier General Mordecai Gist had been unable to prevent the British from withdrawing beneath the protection of their armed vessels. Brereton still possessed several hundred troops and a substantial flotilla, and the underlying reason for his expedition remained unchanged: Charleston needed food.

The events that followed were not a separate British raid on Beaufort. They were the second phase of the same operation. Over approximately the next week Brereton shifted his forces from the Combahee into the Beaufort waterways, landed hundreds of troops on Port Royal and St. Helena Islands, negotiated for large quantities of provisions, and attempted to protect the operation with armed vessels. Gist followed him south. Their confrontation at Port Royal Ferry resulted in the capture of the British galley *Balfour* and effectively ended the offensive phase of the expedition, although British provisioning continued under negotiated restrictions for several days afterward.

An Army Preparing to Leave

Brereton was not conducting an operation intended to restore British political control over Beaufort District. By August 8, 1782 the British had already decided to evacuate Charleston. Their immediate problem was sustaining the garrison and the large Loyalist and civilian population concentrated there while the evacuation was organized.

British expeditions consequently continued to move into the Lowcountry seeking cattle, rice and other provisions. The Combahee was particularly attractive because its rice plantations were accessible by water. On August 26 the British sent a flotilla consisting of a sloop of war, three armed galleys, three brigantines and numerous smaller vessels into the river. Brereton commanded the troops supporting the operation.

Leslie's correspondence makes the strategic connection unusually clear. A catalog description of his September 8 dispatch to Sir Guy Carleton summarizes its subjects as the evacuation of Charleston and the procurement of provisions for Charleston. The two matters were therefore directly related in British planning. Brereton's Beaufort operation was a provisioning expedition undertaken by an army preparing for evacuation.

August 28: Brereton Moves South

The British had survived the fighting of August 27 largely because their naval force gave them a means of escape that Gist could not easily challenge. At the Combahee, Gist had approximately

300 Continental light troops available, but British vessels anchored in the river prevented him from simply crossing and overwhelming Brereton's men. British troops ashore could fight delaying actions and then retreat under naval protection.

After the Combahee fighting, Brereton did not immediately return to Charleston. A later account describes the flotilla moving through St. Helena Sound into the Coosaw River, bringing it into the water network surrounding Beaufort and Port Royal Island. The destination was logical. Port Royal and St. Helena were agricultural islands containing livestock, corn, rice and poultry—the very commodities the British needed.

The British Land on Port Royal Island

The scale of that operation can now be established from the surviving contemporary account of the truce negotiated between Brereton and the local American commander. Brereton stated on his honor that he had 500 men fit for duty, and importantly, that he had already landed them before sending a flag to the Americans. The document identifies his force as containing men of the 64th Regiment, part of the 84th Regiment, Lord Rawdon's Corps and Hessians. It also says that Rawdon's Corps had arrived in ships under Major Doyle.

Against this force stood Lieutenant Colonel Edward Barnwell. Edward was an experienced Beaufort District militia officer who had already fought British and Loyalist foraging forces earlier in 1782. In February, he had commanded Beaufort militia attempting to prevent Major Andrew DeVeaux from taking rice from plantations along the lower Savannah. At Port Royal, however, Barnwell had virtually no force with which to resist Brereton. The contemporary account says he possessed only twenty-five men, “indifferently armed and worse accoutred.” Against 500 British and Hessian troops supported by shipping and artillery, military resistance would have accomplished little. Barnwell negotiated.

Barnwell's Truce

On Port Royal Island the British were permitted to take the existing stores of old corn and rice, together with beef, sheep, hogs and poultry needed for subsistence. By the terms of the truce, the corn, rice and other provisions were to be carried to Broad River to Brereton. In return, Brereton promised not to molest property inside houses. Crops remaining in the fields were protected. Enslaved people belonging to inhabitants were not to be carried away. Unarmed residents entering the British-controlled area would not be treated as prisoners. Brereton promised not to cross the road identified as the “Broad River road,” and more significantly, he agreed not to enter Beaufort. Finally, after the agreed collection had been completed, Brereton promised not to land again on Port Royal Island or remove additional property.

Barnwell had effectively exchanged provisions the British possessed sufficient force to seize anyway for protection of the population and restrictions upon Brereton's operation. It was less a military truce than a negotiated limitation upon an occupation and requisition.

St. Helena Island

Brereton simultaneously demanded provisions from St. Helena. Here the quantities demonstrate the real scale of the expedition. The British required: 1,500 bushels of corn, 200 bullocks, 150 sheep, and poultry. In return, they promised not to advance farther into St. Helena or otherwise molest the inhabitants or their property.

Two hundred cattle alone represented a substantial food supply. Combined with the corn, rice, sheep, hogs and poultry being gathered elsewhere, the operation clearly exceeded the immediate needs of Brereton's field force. The provisioning was clearly on behalf of the larger British establishment in Charles Town.

Gist Initially Held Back

Meanwhile, Gist had to determine whether the British movement toward Beaufort was genuine. He could not simply abandon the Combahee. His mission included protecting American provisions there, and a movement toward Beaufort might have been intended to lure him away, but reports increasingly demonstrated that Brereton had actually landed troops on the Sea Islands of Beaufort.

Gist moved south, and this time he had something he had lacked at the crucial moment on the Combahee: effective field artillery for use against the British vessels. A six-pounder cannon accompanied his force, transforming his tactical options. At Tar Bluff, Brereton's vessels had provided sanctuary. At Port Royal Ferry, those same vessels would become Gist's target.

Port Royal Ferry was the principal northern gateway to Port Royal Island. An American force approaching Beaufort from the mainland naturally threatened Brereton through this corridor. British control of the ferry was needed to protect the northern flank of the entire provisioning operation. Two armed British galleys were stationed there at anchor: *Balfour* and *Shark*. Both had participated in the Combahee operation. A later account describes *Balfour* as carrying two nine-pounders.

From the water the galleys could dominate the ferry crossing, prevent or disrupt an American passage, support British troops on Port Royal Island and provide Brereton with another protected line of withdrawal. Gist decided to remove them.

September 1: The Action at Port Royal Ferry

The traditional date assigned to the engagement is September 2. Primary-source chronology indicates otherwise. The modern editors of the Greene correspondence, working from Gist's September 2 report, state specifically that Gist's light infantry fired upon the two British galleys at Port Royal Ferry on September 1. September 2 appears to have entered later histories because that was the date of Gist's report. So the actual engagement should be dated: September 1, 1782.

Gist brought his six-pounder into action against *Balfour* and *Shark*. According the McGrady narrative, Gist reached the ferry, found *Balfour* and another galley lying there, and obtained an “advantageous position” for his fieldpiece. Lieutenant Bocker commanded the gun and his fire quickly caused the British vessels to slip their cables and attempt to escape.

The British reaction was immediate. The report that both galleys slipped their anchors, rather than spending the time required to raise them normally, and attempted to escape. A later account says the repaired *Balfour* was fitted with two nine-pounders and placed under Lieutenant Adams. The British obviously considered remaining under Gist's artillery fire more dangerous than sacrificing their anchors. *Shark* escaped. *Balfour* did not.

As *Balfour* attempted to pull away from the American fire, she ran aground. That fact comes directly from the editorial summary of Gist's September 2 report. The British then attempted to scuttle the vessel. A later account adds that her crew hastily spiked her guns before abandoning ship, but the Americans reached her before she could be destroyed. They recovered provisions aboard the galley and subsequently repaired the vessel. The cargo included beef, rice and poultry, which were precisely the commodities Brereton had come to Beaufort District to obtain.

We know that the galleys were operating at Port Royal Ferry and that *Balfour* grounded while pulling away from American fire. Two escape routes were geographically possible: westward toward Whale Branch and Broad River, or eastward through the Coosaw system toward Beaufort River. Logically, the eastern route makes more sense as it would have been the direction from which the British approached th4e ferry coming from St Helena Sound via the Coosaw-Whale Branch corridor.

The Barnwell–Brereton truce document reports that British vessels were subsequently lying at "Mr George Scotts in Beauford river." Thus, a British naval concentration definitely existed on the eastern side of Port Royal Island. It is reasonable to hypothesize that *Shark*, after escaping Gist, headed toward that concentration.

September 2–4: The Expedition Continues

The capture of *Balfour* did not instantly drive Brereton out of Beaufort District, and this fact is perhaps the most important distinction between the historical event and the simplified "battle" narrative. Brereton still possessed hundreds of troops. Other British vessels remained nearby. Provisions were still being collected under the agreements with Port Royal and St. Helena residents. Therefore, Gist stayed.

His September 4 report to Greene stated that intelligence placed enemy vessels in Beaufort River and indicated that vessels previously mentioned carried reinforcements consisting of Rawdon's Corps and Hessians under Major Doyle. Because of that intelligence, Gist decided to hold his position rather than moving his troops away. The truce document independently confirms the substance of this intelligence: Rawdon's Corps, Hessians and Doyle were indeed involved. So Gist's intelligence was accurate.

The British Fleet at George Scott's

The truce document also gives a particularly valuable geographical marker: "The vessels at present lay at Mr George Scotts in Beauford river." The disposition may therefore have resembled a loose amphibious cordon around Port Royal Island - Broad River side: Brereton receives collected provisions. Port Royal Island: British troops forage within negotiated limits.

Port Royal Ferry: *Balfour* and *Shark* initially protect the northern gateway. Beaufort River: British vessels lie at George Scott's. St. Helena: inhabitants furnish livestock and corn. Beaufort: specifically protected from British entry by the agreement. All of which suggests a much more substantial operation than the conventional account of a Port Royal Ferry skirmish conveys.

September 4: Gist Watches and Waits

On September 4 Nathanael Greene summarized the situation for Francis Marion: “The Enemy are still out to the Southward and General Gist is there with the light troops watching their motions.” He then added the news that Gist had taken one of the enemy's galleys near Port Royal. This gives us a remarkably precise snapshot.

By September 4, Brereton's expedition was still present. Gist's force was still watching it. *Balfour* had been captured and repaired. British vessels remained in Beaufort River. And a negotiated agreement was governing British requisitions from Port Royal and St. Helena. The situation was no longer an unrestricted British raid. It had become a contained provisioning operation conducted under American observation.

The Ending of the Foraging Expedition

Brereton had agreed that once the authorized collection was completed, he would not again land on Port Royal Island or carry away additional property. His operation therefore contained its own termination clause. By September 4 the operation’s military phase had already been curtailed. Gist controlled the northern approach strongly enough to drive away the ferry galleys. *Balfour* was lost. Beaufort was protected by agreement. British movements on Port Royal and St. Helena were geographically limited, and Gist remained close enough to respond if Brereton violated the arrangement. The British could gather the agreed provisions, embark them and leave.

There is no evidence presently located of another significant Brereton engagement around Beaufort after September 4. The American Battlefield Trust therefore reasonably characterizes Port Royal Ferry as ending Brereton's push through the Lowcountry. More precisely, The September 1 action at Port Royal Ferry ended the offensive phase of Brereton's expedition; the provisioning phase continued under the Barnwell agreement for several days afterward before the British withdrew**.**

Edward McCrady's detailed account provides the expedition’s closing date. After describing Gist's attack at Port Royal Ferry and the capture of *Balfour*, he states: “The enemy was recalled on the 6th by the arrival of a fleet to convoy the army…” He then says that as soon as the British passed the Beaufort bar, Gist hurried back to reinforce Greene's main army. McCrady’s account, therefore. explicitly connects the recall to the evacuation: the convoy arrived when “it had now been officially announced” that the army would soon evacuate Charleston.

The Larger Significance

Brereton's expedition was not an outright failure. He had defeated Laurens's small detachment at Tar Bluff and escaped destruction on the Combahee. He subsequently landed approximately 500

troops around Beaufort and obtained significant quantities of food from Port Royal and St. Helena. But the operation became progressively more constrained.

Barnwell forced the British to accept restrictions upon their movements and depredations. Gist followed Brereton from the Combahee. At Port Royal Ferry he attacked the vessels protecting the British operation. *Shark* escaped, but *Balfour* was captured. Part of the British food supply was recovered. And Brereton ultimately completed his requisition under negotiated limits while American troops watched him. The Americans had not destroyed Brereton's expedition, but neither could the British operate freely.

The Beaufort expedition vividly illustrates the extraordinary condition of the war in South Carolina during its final months. The British still possessed enough military power to put 500 regular, provincial and Hessian troops ashore on Port Royal Island, as Barnwell's twenty-five poorly equipped militiamen could not possibly stop them. Yet those 500 British troops were not there to conquer Beaufort. They were there to collect food for an army preparing to leave.

That distinction explains almost everything. Brereton avoided unnecessary battles because casualties served no strategic purpose. Barnwell negotiated because resistance with twenty-five men would have accomplished nothing. Gist attacked the British naval screen rather than attempting a frontal assault against Brereton's entire force. And once sufficient provisions had been collected under agreed restrictions, there was little reason for either side to seek another engagement.

The September 8 dispatch of British commander at Charles Town Leslie provides the final strategic context. Only days after Gist was watching Brereton around Beaufort, Leslie was writing Carleton about two interconnected problems: evacuating Charleston and procuring provisions for Charleston. Brereton's expedition belonged to that final logistical struggle. The British were no longer fighting for South Carolina. They were feeding themselves while preparing to leave it.

And in Beaufort District, Barnwell and Gist made them pay for what they took - Barnwell by limiting the expedition through negotiation, and Gist by pursuing it from the Combahee and capturing one of the armed vessels that had made British foraging possible. By early September 1782, the long contest for control of Beaufort District was effectively over. The remaining British objective was evacuation.

Conclusion

The action at Port Royal Ferry was much more than the brief skirmish of the traditional accounts. It was the precursor to the final stages of a complex, amphibious foraging operation intended to help sustain British troops and Loyalists confined to Charles Town until they could be evacuated. Brereton's occupation of the Beaufort–Port Royal–St. Helena area had continued for several days after the loss of *Balfour*. Gist remained nearby keenly watching the British while the provisions authorized under the Barnwell agreement were collected and British shipping remained in the Beaufort waterways.

The operation finally ended on September 6, when a fleet arrived to convoy the British forces and Brereton was recalled to Charles Town. Once the British vessels and troops had passed outward across the Beaufort bar, Gist, satisfied that the threat to the district had ended, hurried north to rejoin Greene's main army. The Beaufort phase of the expedition had lasted little more than a week. What had begun as the continuation of a powerful British operation ended with one galley captured, another driven away, the scope of British requisitions restricted by negotiation, and the remaining force withdrawn as preparations for the evacuation of Charleston accelerated.