

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Battle Summaries

The Abandonment of Fort Lyttleton - Revisited

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The Abandonment of Fort Lyttleton - Revisited

Fort Lyttleton was abandoned and partially destroyed by its American defenders on January 31, 1779, immediately before the Battle of Port Royal Island on February 3. The episode is more complicated - and more revealing - than the shorthand version that "the Americans blew up the fort when the British approached." The evidence suggests that Captain John DeTreville made a hurried decision under conditions of poor intelligence and collapsing militia support, only hours before substantial American reinforcements reached Port Royal Ferry. In retrospect, William Moultrie clearly regarded the destruction as unnecessary.

The immediate cause was the fall of Savannah on December 29, 1778. Once Savannah was in British hands, Beaufort and Port Royal Sound became the exposed right flank of Benjamin Lincoln's American position at Purrysburg. General Augustine Prevost could use the waterways between Savannah and Port Royal to threaten Beaufort, raid Patriot plantations, recruit Loyalists, and potentially interfere with American communications along the Savannah River.

Fort Lyttleton stood at Spanish Point, roughly two miles south of Beaufort, commanding the Beaufort River approach from Port Royal Sound. It was a substantial colonial-era fortification - a triangular tabby work approximately 400 by 375 feet, with a bastion, two half-bastions, barracks, magazine, and artillery positions. It had originally been constructed against the Spanish threat and had been repaired and remanned by the revolutionary government beginning in 1775. The problem in January 1779 was not primarily the fort itself. It was manpower.

The fort was commanded by Captain John Francis DeTreville of the 4th South Carolina Regiment, but his Continental detachment was extremely small. Accounts differ somewhat on its precise strength, but the available evidence consistently depicts a handful of regular artillerymen supplemented by local militia. And the British force approaching Port Royal was considerably stronger.

The British movement was already known in Charleston by January 29. This is where a contemporary document becomes particularly valuable. Francis Marion wrote Benjamin Lincoln on January 29 that intelligence had arrived that: "8 Ships of the Enemy was Coming through Scull Creek" and that firing had been heard from an American battery at Jenkins Creek, where Marion reported three 26-pounders manned entirely by militia.

More importantly, the South Carolina government considered Fort Lyttleton sufficiently endangered that President John Rutledge and the Privy Council asked Marion to send Lieutenant Colonel Bernard Beekman of the artillery to take command of the fort. Marion immediately ordered Beekman there. As late as January 29 the state government intended to defend Fort Lyttleton, not abandon it.

The British Fleet Approaches

The approach of the British was well-known at least two days prior to the abandonment of the fort. As recounted in the Francis Marion papers recently released by SC 250, on January 29, 1779, Lt. Col. Francis Marion wrote Major General Benjamin Lincoln from Charleston: "8 Ships

of the Enemy was Coming through Scull Creek, about 12 miles before Fort Littleton…" He then says firing had been heard in that direction the previous afternoon and that he had been told it came from: "a Battery of ours on Jenkin's Creek where we have 3-26 pounders" Marion adds that the battery was manned entirely by militia, that he did not yet know the outcome, and that Rutledge and the Privy Council had asked him to send Lt. Col. Bernard Beekman to command Fort Lyttleton.

From this evidence, there was an American coastal battery called the Jenkins Creek battery, armed with three heavy 26-pounders, in January 1779. But the modern location of Jenkins Creek is problematic as the site given the other documented sources. It lies to the east-northeast of Beaufort between St. Helena Island and Dataw Island, communicating with the Morgan River. Beaufort County still identifies Eddings Point Landing as being on Jenkins Creek. The fleet was approaching through the inland passage to the west side of Port Royal Island and Beaufort, and a battery there could not meaningfully engage ships coming north through Skull Creek toward Port Royal Sound and Fort Lyttleton.

Three 26-pounders constitute a formidable coastal battery. That is not the sort of defensive work one would station on an obscure inland creek. Three guns of that weight make excellent sense protecting one of the navigable strategic approaches to Port Royal Sound and Beaufort. The fact that Marion knows there are three 26-pounders indicates it is not an unknown local militia artillery.

SCDAH records show that South Carolina had received thirty French 26-pounders during Governor William Henry Lyttelton's administration**.** These were therefore part of a known provincial arsenal rather than mysterious locally owned guns. And there is direct evidence that the revolutionary government redistributed those guns among coastal batteries. On January 21, 1776, the Council of Safety ordered: "three twenty-six pounders" removed individually from batteries on Henry Laurens's land, Prioleau's wharf and Beale's position and transported to Sullivan's Island. The guns were clearly government property. They were individually assigned to defensive positions and could be moved from one battery to another.

A notable parallel supports the three heavy gun battery. At Sullivan's Island in 1776, three of the French 26-pounders were grouped together on the western bastion. Contemporary newspaper descriptions give that position as three 26-pounders plus two 9-pounders. So, a three-gun 26-pounder battery was not an implausible arrangement. Which makes Marion's description look increasingly like a deliberately constructed channel-defense battery**.**

The Defense Begins

The editors of the *Francis Marion Papers* connect Marion's letter with a January 29 letter from Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. Pinckney reported that intelligence indicated: "a heavy cannonade began about ten in the morning and was continued for several hours." Pinckney was sufficiently concerned about the ships appearing in Skull Creek that he wondered whether the entire operation was a British diversion, intended to draw Lincoln's army away from the Savannah River while the British crossed elsewhere.

Two independent senior American officers discussing the same episode makes it highly likely that the cannonade was associated with Gardiner's naval movement rather than being unrelated firing occurring many miles away near Dataw. And Marion's description fits the Skull Creek geography extremely well "Scull Creek, about 12 miles before fort Littleton." The northern points of Pinckney Island are about 12.5 miles from Fort Lyttleton's location at Spanish Point. This would also explain why the battery disappears from most narratives. Once Gardiner's ships passed it, the decisive defense of Beaufort shifted to Fort Lyttleton - and then, after DeTreville evacuated that fort, to Moultrie's field force.

Several sources point to the Pinckney Island location of the battery. Marion's January 29 letter unquestionably says the British vessels were coming through Skull Creek and that firing was attributed to an American battery on "Jenkin's Creek" containing three 26-pounders. The editors of the Marion papers identify the episode as Gardiner's Hilton Head diversion and cite Charles Cotesworth Pinckney's independent report that a "heavy cannonade" continued for several hours.

The same SCDAH historical material says that by 1707 a scout boat was stationed in this vicinity and a small fortification occupied the northern end of the island to watch the southern approaches. And the separate fort inventory identifies: Water Passage Fort (1715), Pinckney Island - a South Carolina colonial militia lookout post or watch house located on the northern end of the island at Mackays Creek. The northern end of Pinckney Island had a long-established military significance well before the Revolution. And Water Passage Fort was more than a casual lookout Further, an academic discussion of the Carolina-Florida Indian conflict records that on September 28, 1719, an expedition against the Yamassee settlements near St. Augustine: "set out from Water Passage Fort" in seven canoes.

This indicates Water Passage Fort was functioning not merely as a warning station but as an operational base for offensive expeditions moving south through the inland waterway.It is exactly the same maritime corridor Gardiner's expedition would traverse in the opposite direction It all points to a defensive position whose strategic value was recognized repeatedly over perhaps three generations, and it also would signify that the Port Royal Island campaign actually begins earlier than history has recorded, making the action at the battery potentially the first actual combat of the 1779 Port Royal expedition.

The Abandonment of Fort Lyttleton

The most persuasive interpretation is that the local militia supporting DeTreville withdrew or dispersed when it became apparent that the British expedition was approaching Port Royal Island. DeTreville was left with a tiny Continental detachment in a fixed fortification facing what appeared to be an overwhelmingly superior naval and land force. The eight-vessel British expedition was moving through Skull Creek behind Hilton Head rather than simply sailing directly through Port Royal Sound. HMS *Vigilant*, a de-masted schooner serving essentially as a large floating battery by this point, was accompanied by two gunships and smaller vessels along with approximately 160–200 British regulars under Major Valentine Gardiner, who is sometimes called William. The *Vigilant* had been damaged in a storm on the voyage south from New York. Beaufort County history identifies Prevost's naval warship support as *Vigilant*, *Keppel* and

Greenwich. The appearance of that force must have seemed much larger and more dangerous to isolated militia posts than it actually was.

A biographical study of DeTreville in the Journal of the American Revolution describes the choice explicitly: defend the fort, surrender, or retreat. Once his militia deserted, defending it appeared impractical. If so, Fort Lyttleton was not stormed. There was apparently no British assault upon the fort and no battle for possession of it. DeTreville abandoned it because he believed its capture was imminent. Before withdrawing he attempted to deny its artillery and works to the British. He: spiked the cannon, damaged or destroyed the principal bastion, and withdrew his surviving force toward Port Royal Ferry. The best-supported date for the abandonment is January 31, 1779, although some later accounts give February 1. The South Carolina Historical Society places the destruction on January 31.

.At the time of the fleet's approach up the Beaufort River, DeTreville apparently did not know that Brigadier General William Moultrie was approaching with approximately 300 men. Moultrie reached the Port Royal Ferry on the evening of January 31 - the same day DeTreville destroyed the fort. This is a classic example of the problems of eighteenth-century command and communications. DeTreville made a rational decision based upon the information available at Spanish Point, but information that would have changed that decision was only a few miles away.

And the fort may not have been destroyed nearly as thoroughly as usually implied. Some accounts imply that DeTreville simply "blew up Fort Lyttleton." That is misleading. When American troops subsequently examined the position, the fort apparently remained substantially usable. One account reports that stores remained in the fort and that the cannon had been rather lightly spiked - apparently sufficiently lightly that the obstructions could have been removed from the touchholes. If so this points to the evacuation and partial demolition of Fort Lyttleton rather than its complete destruction.

The irony becomes even greater because Gardiner did not need to reduce Fort Lyttleton.to accomplish his mission The British naval force continued into the Broad River, putting troops ashore and attacking Patriot plantations. Thomas Heyward's and Stephen Bull's properties were among those struck. The British ultimately landed their main body on Port Royal Island and moved toward Beaufort. DeTreville had disabled Beaufort's principal permanent defensive work to prevent its capture - but the British operation was largely designed to maneuver around it.

Moultrie crossed onto Port Royal Island, occupied Beaufort and moved against Gardiner. DeTreville and his men marched to Beaufort and joined Moultrie's force. On February 3, the opposing forces met near Gray's Hill. De Treville would serve on the right flank of the Patriot line and would distinguish himself in battle. The Americans, with artillery under officers including Thomas Heyward Jr. and Edward Rutledge, stopped the British advance and forced Gardiner to retreat to his boats. So within approximately three days of Fort Lyttleton's abandonment, the British force whose approach had caused its destruction had itself been driven from Port Royal Island.

But Fort Lyttleton may not have been abandoned entirely by the Patriots. The Heritage Library

identifies Captain James Doharty as commander of Fort Lyttleton from March through June 1779. This would suggest that the fort may not have been destroyed and that it was suitable for further defensive use. The archaeological/historical survey of Port Royal Sound reaches essentially the same conclusion, saying Fort Lyttleton was subsequently manned but "not effectively." It also notes that the loss of an effective fortification opened the Broad River/Port Royal area to British and Loyalist maritime raiding.

But Then Prevost Returned

The February victory did not solve the strategic problem. During Prevost's offensive toward Charleston in the spring of 1779, American forces were progressively pushed northward. After Prevost withdrew from before Charleston, British forces established themselves in the Beaufort-Port Royal area during the summer. A 1,000-man garrison was left in Beaufort as the reminder of Prevost's army returned to defend Savannah.

By July–September 1779, the British were using HMS *Vigilant* in Beaufort waters and establishing new defensive positions around Port Royal Island. Guns from *Vigilant* were reportedly distributed among several smaller earthworks, while Hessian troops constructed defenses around Mile End, the narrow approach immediately north of Beaufort. Significantly, they apparently did not simply restore Fort Lyttleton as the principal defense of Beaufort.

That probably reflects a fundamental weakness of the old fort's location. Fort Lyttleton protected the Beaufort River approach, but the 1779 British operation demonstrated that an enemy controlling the intricate waterways of Port Royal Sound could enter through Skull Creek, move into Broad River, land elsewhere on Port Royal Island, and approach Beaufort overland. So its destruction marked more than the loss of a fort. It demonstrated that the eighteenth-century concept of defending Beaufort principally with a fixed battery at Spanish Point had become strategically inadequate.

Conclusion

Fort Lyttleton was abandoned not because the British captured it, but because its isolated commander believed capture was inevitable. The British seizure of Savannah transformed Port Royal Sound into a front line almost overnight. Gardiner's flotilla appeared in Skull Creek; outlying American batteries exchanged fire; militia support around Fort Lyttleton began collapsing; and DeTreville, commanding only a tiny Continental detachment, had no reliable knowledge that substantial reinforcements were approaching. So, he evacuated the position, spiked its guns and partially demolished its principal works.

But the decision came perhaps only hours too soon. Moultrie arrived at Port Royal Ferry with approximately 300 men that same day and three days later defeated the very British force DeTreville feared.

The result was paradoxical: the Americans won the Battle of Port Royal Island but lost Fort Lyttleton without the British ever having to attack it. The fort appears never to have been considered obsolete and never fully restored during the Revolution; the state eventually treated

the site as abandoned property, appointing commissioners in 1785 to determine the boundaries of the land “on which Fort Lyttelton…formerly stood” and sell it.