The Battle of Brier Creek

The Battle of Brier Creek was the pivotal encounter which decided the fate of Georgia for three years in the American Revolution. The disparity in preparedness, military training, and intelligence about the enemy's movements gave a superior advantage to the King's army. The British skillful battle maneuver encircling the Patriots, successful decoy and surprise charge into the Patriots camp ensured the British victory. The total rout of the Patriots re-established Georgia as a Royal Colony—the only one of the Thirteen American Colonies to do so --- until the British were forced to evacuate in 1782.

Col. Samuel Elbert, commanding Georgia Continentals and Georgia Militia, made one of the most gallant stands against overwhelming odds during the Revolutionary War. After Patriot Gen. Ashe's militia had been routed, Elbert, with his back to Brier Creek and surrounded on the other sides, attempted to fight his way through the British lines. It was only after British reserves intervened that he surrendered the remnants of his courageous command. Of the 150 Americans killed in the Battle of Brier Creek more than half were Elbert's men. His life was spared but he was captured and imprisoned for two years. When exchanged, he took part in the Battle of Yorktown where he was promoted to General. After the Revolutionary War in 1785, Samuel Elbert was elected Governor of Georgia.

Samuel Elbert, courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

The Battle of Brier Creek Historical Marker is located off Brannen Bridges Road in the Tuckahoe Wildlife Management Area, in Screven County, Georgia.

Annual Celebration of
Battle of Brier Creek
Saturday prior to March 3rd
"Battle Site" Screven County, GA
GPS: N32.811 W81.466

Georgia's Revolutionary War Trail

1775 1783

Cherokee Indians

SOUTH CAROLINA

OGEECHEE

Creek Indians

SAVANNAH R.

CHARLES TOWN

GEORGIA

ALTAMAHA

PORT ROYAL
SAVANNAH

SUNBURY

MAP OF GEORGIA, 1778

EAST FLORIDA

ST. AUGUSTINE

American Revolution in Georgia

1 Elbert County — Fight at Van(n)'s Creek
GPS: N34.162 W82.744

2 Wilkes County — Battle of Kettle Creek
GPS: N33.691 W82.886

3 Lincoln County — Elijah Clarke & John Dooly: Heroes of the Hornet's Nest
GPS: N33.856 W82.410

4 Augusta — Sieges of Augusta and Revolutionary Capital of Georgia GPS: N33.476 W81.964

5 Screven County – Battle of Brier Creek
GPS: N32.811 W81.466

6 Savannah – Battles of Savannah, Royal & Revolutionary Capital of Georgia
GPS: N32.076 W81.100

7 Liberty County — Sunbury, Fort Morris & Midway
GPS: N31.764 W81.279

8 St. Simons Island —Frederica Naval Action
GPS: N31.224 W81.393

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Design — Ed Fluker, GASSAR

Georgia's Revolutionary War Trail

1775 1783

"Discovering Our Heritage and History"

Battle of Brier Creek

~ March 3, 1779 ~

Brier Creek was the pivotal encounter which re-established Georgia as a Royal Colony.

Georgia
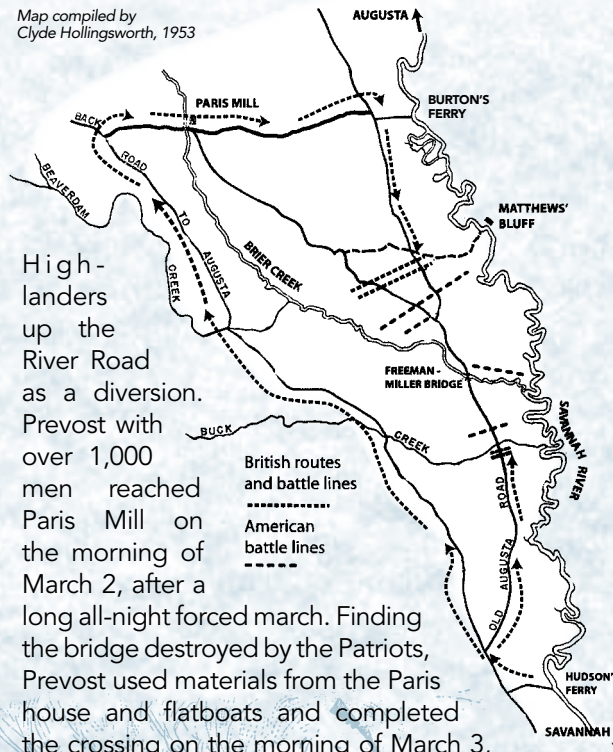ExploreGeorgia.org

Battle of Brier Creek

✺ March 3, 1779 ✺

In the fall of 1778, British Lord Germain directed Sir Henry Clinton to subdue the Carolinas and Georgia. His "Southern Strategy" was based on the Royal Governors' statements that Loyalist militia could be recruited to return these Colonies to the Crown. Lt. Col. Archibald Campbell was dispatched from New York to Savannah which he captured on December 29, 1778. Campbell then proceeded to Augusta to recruit Loyalists in the back country. After realizing limited success and fearing the gathering Patriot forces, in mid-February, he decided to retreat to Hudson's Ferry on the Savannah River in Effingham (current Screven) County. Campbell learned of Lt. Col. Boyd's defeat at Kettle Creek when Maj. William Spurgen and other survivors rejoined his forces.

Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, Continental Army Southern Department Commander, developed a plan to retake Savannah and secure Georgia. Lincoln ordered Gen. John Ashe's North Carolina Militia to rebuild the Freeman- Miller Bridge at Brier Creek in Burke (current Screven) County and await reinforcements. On February 27, Gen. Ashe with 1,300 men arrived at the bridge, and was immediately summoned to a council of war at nearby Black Swamp by Gen. Lincoln. Gen. Rutherford at Black Swamp and Gen. Andrew Williamson near Augusta were ordered by Lincoln to join Ashe at Brier Creek and launch an offensive to drive the British back to Savannah.

At Hudson's Ferry, Campbell relinquished his command to Lt. Col. Mark Prevost, who was the brother of Maj. Gen. Augustine Prevost, Commander of the British Southern forces. Realizing the urgency of rapid deployment, Campbell instructed Prevost to immediately proceed northwestward to Paris Mill, cross Brier Creek and attack Ashe from the rear. Campbell also directed Maj. Duncan McPherson's

Highlanders up the River Road as a diversion. Prevost with over 1,000 men reached Paris Mill on the morning of March 2, after a long all-night forced march. Finding the bridge destroyed by the Patriots, Prevost used materials from the Paris house and flatboats and completed the crossing on the morning of March 3, about fifteen miles above Ashe's camp.

When Ashe returned from Lincoln's war council on March 2, he ordered a path cleared to Matthew's Bluff to aid Rutherford's crossing and received word from scouts who had no knowledge of Prevost's forces at Paris Mill. During the morning of March 3, Ashe sent Maj. John Ross with 300 dragoons to assess the British forces at Hudson's Ferry which Ashe intended to attack as soon as Rutherford's reinforcements arrived. Ross discovered the British had moved north, but did not report it to Ashe.

As Prevost moved south on the River Road toward Ashe's camp on March 3, he encountered scouts and took them prisoner. Late in the afternoon, Prevost's men skirmished with the forward line of Ashe's pickets and gunfire was heard in the Patriot camp. An express rider galloped in to inform Ashe of the imminent attack by the British coming down the road six abreast. Ashe ordered the beat to arms, but cartridges had not been issued and men grabbed what they could. Many guns had the wrong bore for the ammunition, and battle lines

were formed with much confusion.

The New Bern N.C. Militia was to the left against Brier Creek with Col. Samuel Elbert and his Continentals in the center and the Edenton N.C. Militia to the right. Seventy yards behind were the Halifax and Wilmington N.C. Militia. Facing the Patriots were Sir James Baird's Light Infantry on the left, Prevost's 2nd Battalion 71st Highland Regiment in the center, and Carolina Loyalists to the right. The Florida Grenadiers, Light Dragoons and Rangers were in the rear.

The British opened with artillery fire into the Patriots' center. Ashe ordered Elbert forward and to the left within thirty yards of the Highlanders, but this movement cut off many in the New Bern Militia. The Edenton Militia advanced, but with the threat of being flanked, opened a gap in the center. The Highlanders surged into the gap with a bayonet charge, and the Patriot militia began to break and run in a disorderly retreat. Almost alone, Elbert's men stood and fought, pressed against Brier Creek. So fiercely did these Georgians fight, the British had to bring up reserves that quickly overwhelmed Elbert's men. Elbert was knocked to the ground by a Highlander for dispatch by bayonet, but was saved by a British officer after making the Masonic sign of distress.

Ashe pursued his retreating troops on horseback in an attempt to rally them, but to no avail, and escaped at Matthew's Bluff with many others. The total dead on the Patriot side were at least 150 with over 200 captured, including Col. Elbert and Lt. Col John McIntosh. An unknown number were drowned attempting to cross the river. Col. John Dooly and his Wilkes County Militia arrived on March 4, and buried the Patriot dead most likely in a mass grave. The British only lost five men with eleven wounded.

Following the Battle, Lt. Col. Prevost was made acting Royal Governor of Georgia until Sir James Wright's return to Savannah. Patriot Gen. Ashe was acquitted at court martial but was censured for his failure to prepare his soldiers against attack.

Map compiled by Clyde Hollingsworth, 1953

AUGUSTA

PARIS MILL

BURTON'S FERRY

BACK ROAD

BEAVERDAM CREEK

TO AUGUSTA

MATTHEWS' BLUFF

BRIER CREEK

FREEMAN- MILLER BRIDGE

BUCK CREEK

SAVANNAH RIVER

British routes and battle lines

American battle lines

OLD AUGUSTA ROAD

HUDSON'S FERRY

SAVANNAH