

Historical Marker Commemorating Colonel Thomas Sumter's Camp at Clems Branch June–July 1780

by William Lee Anderson III, 16 April 2007

New Historical Marker

A new South Carolina historical marker commemorating Colonel Thomas Sumter's Clems Branch camp during the Revolutionary War has been erected by the Lancaster County Historical Commission after review and approval by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. The marker is located at the Clems Branch bridge on Harrisburg Road, SR29-64, in upper Lancaster County. The historical campsite is a half mile upstream on the South Carolina and North Carolina state line adjoining both Lancaster and Mecklenburg Counties.



Historical Marker commemorating Colonel Thomas Sumter's Camp on Clems Branch

The historical significance of this camp is that it is where South Carolinians began to recapture their state from British Army occupation. South Carolinians under Thomas Sumter demonstrated a willingness to resist. Their perseverance ultimately succeeded.

Some history books say this was a “secret” or “hidden” camp. Actually, it was more hidden in modern times than it was in 1780 when it straddled the Camden-Charlotte wagon road. Within the last two years, the camp's precise location was established from three hand-drawn 19th-century maps, nine Revolutionary War pension applications, and the oral tradition of the Culp Family.

The 300 to 500 Patriots here were for the most part South Carolinian refugees who had been chased off their farms by loyalists. In early June 1780, they joined at Tuckasegee Ford in North Carolina and recognized Colonel Thomas Sumter as their leader. After the Battle of Ramsour's Mill on 20 June 1780, at present-day Lincolnton, North Carolina, Sumter marched his men to this site. It was here that they first returned to South Carolina to reclaim their State.

They were courageous men. During the preceding month, Charleston had fallen to the British forces. Just four weeks earlier, Lt. Colonel Tarleton's cavalymen had killed 113 Continental soldiers and wounded 150 more just 25 miles away at Buford's Defeat battleground. Those wounded Americans were still being cared for in the homes of nearby residents. Just 7 days earlier, British cavalymen under Captain Huck had burned William Hill's Iron Works at present-day Lake Wylie. Just 5 days earlier, Sumter's men had been at the Battle of Ramsour's Mill where they confiscated military equipment abandoned by loyalists. While they camped here, a significant British Army outpost was at Hanging Rock just 35 miles to the south on the same road. Despite all these adverse conditions, these men risked their lives in joining Sumter.

They were determined men. They felt aggrieved by the way they were forced off their farms. They were determined to recover what was taken from them. They were willing to suffer considerable hardships. Almost all had prior militia or other military experience, but here, only the highest ranking officers wore

uniforms. Each man brought his own weapon, horse, and foodstuffs. Among the men here was at least one future general, Thomas Sumter, and a future governor of Kentucky, John Adair.



Brigadier General Thomas Sumter
Painted by Rembrandt Peale, 1796.

More details and source references are in the historical marker application at <http://www.elehistory.com/amrev/SumtersClemsBranchCamp.pdf>. It contains hand-drawn maps and eyewitness accounts described by veterans in their pension applications.

Other historical events at this location

This location is where Lord Cornwallis's army of 2000 redcoats first invaded NC on 25 September 1780. They captured Charlotte the next day. On 28 May 1791, President George Washington noted in his diary how he was greeted here by an honorary escort of Mecklenburg-militia cavalrymen during his tour of southern states. When he learned that the escort was departing rather than returning to their home area, he dismissed them. He wrote:

Saturday 28th. Sett off from Crawfords by 4 O'clock and breakfasting at one Harrisons 18 miles from it & got into Charlotte, 13 miles further, before 3 o'clock. Dined with Genl. Polk and a small party invited by him, at a Table prepared for the purpose. ... It ought to have been mentioned also that upon my entering the State of No. Carolina, I was met by a Party of the Mecklenburg horse — but these being near their homes I dismissed them.

It is nice that this site is rescued from obscurity.

Milestone on Camden-Charlotte Road

A re-discovered historical milestone was nearby. It may date from the Revolutionary War era. You can still read its inscription. Originally, the milestone was a quarter mile north of the BridgeHampton entrance on Harrisburg Road. About 1978, it was moved to protect it from logging equipment. In 2013, it was moved again to a display inside the Lancaster County Courthouse in Lancaster, South Carolina.



Milestone originally on Camden-Charlotte Road, present-day Harrisburg Road.
Inscription, outlined by software, means 15 miles to Charlotte.
Parts of the original inscription may have flaked off.

Future Preservation Steps

Concerned individuals want to preserve the Clems Branch campground within South Carolina. Its story can be integrated into planning for a greenway park along Clems Branch within North Carolina.

Help Support Lancaster County Historical Commission

The Lancaster County Historical Commission continues to identify sites of historical importance. If you appreciate efforts like this, you can support the Historical Commission. Donations checks can be made out to the Lancaster County Treasurer and sent to 101 North Main Street, Lancaster, SC 29720, with a notation that it is for the Lancaster County Historical Commission.