

Battle of Brier Creek, Georgia

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' reports that a large 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. Then Campbell marched to Augusta to recruit Loyalists in the back country. After realizing limited success and fearing the gathering Patriots, on February 14, he decided to retreat to Hudson's Ferry on the Savannah River in Burke (current Screven) County. Campbell learned of Lt. Col. Boyd's defeat at Kettle Creek when some of the survivors rejoined his forces.

Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, in charge of the Patriot Southern Department, developed a campaign to retake Savannah and secure Georgia. Lincoln ordered Gen. John Ashe and his North Carolina Militia to rebuild the Freeman- Miller Bridge at Brier Creek and await reinforcements. On February 27, Gen. Ashe with 1,300 men arrived at the bridge which had been burned by the British. His camp included Gen. William Bryant's 2nd North Carolina Militia, Col. Anthony Lytle's North Carolina Infantry, remnants of Col. Samuel Elbert's Georgia Continentals and Georgia Militia as well as Lt. Col. Leonard Malbury's Calvary. Ashe was immediately summoned to a council of war at nearby Black Swamp by Gen. Lincoln who directed his Purrysburg troops, Gen. Rutherford's at Black Swamp, and Gen. Andrew Williamson's near Augusta to join Ashe at Brier Creek where they would launch an offensive to drive the British seaward.

At Hudson's Ferry, Campbell relinquished his command to Lt. Col. Marc Prevost, brother of Maj. Gen. Augustine Prevost, commander of the British 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 directed Maj. Duncan McPherson's 1st Battalion of 71st Regiment up the river road as a diversion. Prevost with over 1,000 men reached Parris Mill on the morning of March 2, after a long all-night forced march off the roads to avoid detection. Finding the bridge destroyed by the Patriots, Prevost used materials from the Parris house and pontoons and completed the crossing on the morning of March 3, about fifteen miles above Ashe's camp.

When Ashe returned from Lincoln's council of war on March 2, he ordered the clearing of a path to Matthew's Bluff to aid the crossing of Rutherford. Scouts returned from Paris Mill on March 2 without knowledge of Prevost's forces. On the morning of March 3, Ashe sent Maj. Frank 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 trail of the British having moved north, but did not report it to Ashe.

As Prevost moved south on the river road towards 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 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 had guns with 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 Elbert and the 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 the Carolina Loyalists to the right. The Florida Grenadiers, Tawse's Light Dragoons, Rangers and mounted militia were in the rear.

The British opened with artillery fire into the Patriot's center line. Ashe ordered Elbert forward and to the left within thirty yards of the Highlanders. This movement cut off many in the New Bern Militia. The Edenton Militia advanced but did not close ranks with Elbert's Continentals due to the threat of being flanked, creating 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, but were pressed against Brier Creek. So fiercely did these Georgians fight that the British had to bring up

reserves that overwhelmed Elbert's men in a short but intense fight. 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. He escaped at Matthew's Bluff as did 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 lost by drowning in an attempt to cross the river. Col. John Dooly and his Wilkes County Militia arrived on March 4 from Kettle Creek and buried the dead in a mass grave. The British only lost five men with eleven wounded.

Lt. Col. Prevost was made acting Royal Governor of Georgia. Gen. Ashe was acquitted at court martial but was censured for his failure to prepare his soldiers against attack.

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